I've Always Been A Daughter

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I've Always Been A Daughter

by air_of_the_Waterfall

Summary

It's been a month since Will and Abigail ran away with Hannibal. Living in a safe Canadian town, Will and Hannibal are free to explore their newfound intimacy and Abigail has a chance at the future she craves. However, upon meeting Hannibal's sister Mischa and her daughter, loyalties are tested and insecurities run rampant. The Lecters have an undeniably dark past, and as Abigail and Will fall deeper into its truths, Hannibal's manipulation and misguided love come to light more clearly than ever before.

Notes

I've been working on this for years and I'm just ready to move on from it, so I'm posting it even though I'm not entirely satisfied. Hopefully you can get something out of it because there are elements that I really am proud of :)

The title is from "Home" by Gabrielle Aplin.

Chapter 1

A ghost entered a cafe in an old Ontarian town.

To an outside eye, the scene was utterly normal, utterly benign, but behind the veil of snow, it writhed. No older than eighteen, she had the mournful eyes and resolute demeanor of a banshee, yet as she ordered, a polite smile revealed that she clung to the mirth of lost innocent years. Pink bites from the breeze coloured her pale, freckled cheeks. This wasn't her usual haunt, but the warm scents of coffee, cocoa, and pastries made a welcoming, sanctified world here all the same. She ordered her drink to go.

"What's your name?" the cashier asked, holding a marker to a cup.

"Carly." Abigail tilted her chin up to gather courage as she said it, not having yet mastered the lie. Coffee machines, footsteps, and voices sounded quieter to her on one side than the other.

She pulled a card from her wallet, and as she tapped it to pay it seemed to prick at her fingers until the machine took mercy and announced its job complete. Finally, she fumbled to shove it out of sight. Sweat gathered between her palms and the paper cup when she took it with both hands.

Nothing was more normal than a young adult buying coffee, but Abigail had all the world's eyes on her back. Judgement skittered beneath her skin, and she made a great jittery effort to avoid glancing at security cameras; they were not going to spring to life and slap cuffs on her. No one would look at her twice unless she made a spectacle of her unease. There were only a few people at scattered tables anyway.

She all but *felt* the familiar voices telling her to breathe, relax, hold her head high like her life depended on it, because it very well could.

It wasn't this simple purchase that rubbed her the wrong way, but rather the means. Nothing about the money she spent was illicit, but she still felt like she was getting away with something. Hannibal Lecter lavished his family with gifts and only the finest of foods. In their new life, very little was off limits, and Abigail was closer than ever to the independence she had been dreaming of since middle school. She had a car, her own space in their house, passed the time how she pleased, and spoke to Hannibal and Will when she felt like it. She could go to university when they settled somewhere further away. They wouldn't get caught, and everything would be okay.

In the meantime, they hung suspended in a languid truce while they adjusted. If she didn't know better, she would think Hannibal was trying to make up for… everything. In reality, he probably just found it amusing.

When Abigail cozied up in their living room with a fire crackling and dogs at her feet, muffled conversation drifting from the kitchen on the scents of dinner cooking, intense gratitude blurred her eyes. She was safe there. Out in the real world, without them and their

brilliance at her side, guilt and fear encroached. Dozens upon dozens of people were dead, strewn behind their heels on the path to this place.

She would gladly trade an unlimited bank card in for the promise that Hannibal wouldn't deem her inconvenient and kill her. So far, no such assurance had been given. She had traded her integrity and her ear for his regard, but what of his love? He cared for her, but was she irreplaceable? They had carried on many verbal sparring matches where Abigail was plenty reckless and rude, yet here she remained.

Stepping back outside was a flip from steaming mugs and hardwood to fluttering snow and a deep grey sky. Streetlights cast a warm glow on intervals of damp pavement, but the air had been chapping her skin all day and her mouth tasted of balm. The wind tugged incessantly at leafless trees in the park across the street, picking up speed and howling between buildings like a massive, out-of-tune flute. Abigail wore a stylish black jacket that didn't really keep her warm, and the sky seemed to snatch the coffee's heat right out from under her mittened hands. It was too cold to waste the heat, but the liquid was too hot to drink. Surrendering, she removed the plastic lid and let thermodynamics do their thing, blowing gently to move it along as she started walking.

Mere metres from the cafe, she exhaled and blood splattered into the cup, leaking red into brown until it couldn't be seen. Ripples of disturbance became a violent wave as Abigail's arm thrashed in panic, spilling half the cup over herself and the pavement, melting snow that had just begun to stick. Her mind fell backwards as if down a flight of stairs, pulling with it memories of deer with matted fur flayed back to expose their viscera… girls just like her, their hair braided into tassels for pillows that Abigail slept on, her own hair splayed out in tangles amongst it… slick heat pouring from her throat. Her father… no… Garret Jacob Hobbs' bloody attempt at what he perceived as a final loving embrace.

Her throat quivered with a long, sobbing whimper, but she could not hear the sound. Her vision turned to muddy static. Her feet numbed and she was going to fall. Her stomach clenched and she was going to throw up. She fumbled her hands across the column of malleable flesh that was her neck, searching for a ragged gash that, objectively, she knew wasn't there. Put pressure on the wound. Cling to your life. Don't just fall limply to the floo– No! Her hands slipped in blood, the tile around her leaking death and colour flourishing as she watched herself from above. Time ran too fast for her to catalogue. Electric shocks burst unexpectedly cold in her gut, yet she began to sweat and shake. Her hands flew to her face to muffle her sobs, only to slick with more blood. Soft mittens turned red in streaks and blooms.

Firm hands cradled her neck and the back of her head. A needle nibbled her neck.

"Are you ready to die, Abigail?"

"Abigail, please pass me the cinnamon."

What? Oh. She had to get home. She had to get home.

The world kept blurring out and she struggled for breath, and eventually the wave receded and crept back out to sea. It left her washed up and gasping, hair damp and muscles worn.

Cold pavement… coffee-stained slush… burns numbing her hands…

“Hey, are you alright? You need me to call somebody?”

Abigail swallowed tightly, looking around and slowly coming back online. Everything looked like video footage instead of reality. She sat blinking, sprawled on the sidewalk outside the cafe. Her broken, rapid breath fogged in the air like the contrails of a lost plane, and a stranger crouched a few feet away to look at her, patiently waiting for an answer.

“Um…” she croaked.

The stranger offered a sympathetic smile. “Did you hit your head when you fell? You’re bleeding.”

Abigail wanted to spout, “No shit, Sherlock,” but she didn’t. Why was she bleeding? Carefully, she rubbed her fingers under her scarf, assuring herself that the godforsaken scar was there and physically healed. Her fingers ventured over her chin and rested on her upper lip, then she sighed in recognition. It was just a nosebleed, probably from the dry air.

She took a breath and finally spoke. “I’m… fine. Thanks for caring. I need to go home.”

Noting her blood-soaked gloves, she declined the offer of a hand and pulled herself to her feet, jeans soaked from sitting in slush. A small group had gathered in the cafe door, summoned by her sobs and leaning out to witness her misery, quenching the morbid curiosity that they would deny if confronted. She grabbed her ruined cup and tossed it in the trash, then turned on her heel and braced her head down against the wind.

Independence was something she held fiercely to her chest, and renewed frustration fired up that she hadn’t just driven herself across town for the play she had wanted to see. Instead, thinking she could clear her head with exercise, she had walked by herself not knowing it was going to storm. Surely Hannibal would have known, but she wouldn’t put it past him to let her get caught in the snow for a lesson on forward-thinking. Well, lesson learned. She grit her teeth.

Keeping her head down and a hand over her nose, Abigail rushed blindly into the cafe bathroom and fumbled with a toilet paper roll. It was brand new and stuck in little bits to the other layers, tearing when she tried to get a piece large enough to absorb all her blood. An animalistic groan bubbled up in her chest, but she swallowed it and tasted metal. Finally managing to unroll the tissue into a decent handful, she tipped her head back and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Eventually, she removed the tissue and found it saturated red, but dry. The bleeding had probably stopped a while ago. Squeezing her eyes shut, she listened to ensure she was alone, then whispered, “It’s…” she glanced at her watch, “Five forty-five pm, and I’m in Niagara on the Lake.”

She breathed and repeated the mantra until she felt solid enough to stand straight, flush away the bloody evidence, and open the stall to wash her hands and face. She avoided the mirror, but by the time she was clean, her calm mask was back in place. Meeting her own eyes in the

mirror felt like looking at her pitiful self in the past, in the rearview of Hobbs' car or Marissa's locker door.

Pulling out her phone with numb fingers, she found "Alec Lavelle" in her contacts and held the device to her good ear. He picked up on the first ring, and Abigail nearly fell apart with relief. Ironic as it was, this elegant, accented voice represented whatever safety and security she could have left.

"Hello, Abigail. How was the theatre?"

She smiled, though still weary and shaking. "H-" she cut the name off just in time and overcorrected. "...ey. Hey. Uh, the show's over, and I was walking home, b… but it's windy and freezing, so… can one of you please come and pick me up? Uh… something happened…"

Hannibal's genuine concern still took her by surprise. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I just… my nose bled, and… I panicked."

"Ah, I see. Is this a regular occurrence?"

The nosebleed or the panic attack? "No."

He asked her a few more doctorly questions before concluding that it was, in fact, just the dry air. Finally, he said, "Worry not, my dear. Will can pick you up, and you'll be home just in time for dinner. Where are you?"

She gave him the address of the cafe, and the volume shifted as he spoke away from the phone. "Will, can you please retrieve our daughter? She seems to be stranded in this weather and covered in blood."

Will yelped, "She's what?!"

Abigail snickered, imagining the amused quirk of Hannibal's lips. He clarified to Will, "Apologies for worrying you. She simply had a nosebleed. No one has departed the land of the living. Is that correct, Abigail?"

"Yeah. You're mean."

He murmured as Will shuffled in the background, "We must keep him on his toes."

"On my way, Abigail," Will called, then Hannibal gave him her whereabouts and she heard the front door close.

"Would you like me to stay on the phone with you?" Hannibal asked.

"No, thank you. I'm fine here. See you soon."

"Fifteen minutes or so. *A bientôt* ."

The call disconnected, and Abigail packed her homesick longing into her pockets with the messy gloves. The warm chatter of the cafe had died down, and an employee was mopping the floors.

“We’re closing soon.”

Glancing nervously at the ongoing storm, she answered, “Uh, okay. Thank you.”

Will would be here in time.

. . .

Fists tight around the wheel, Will nudged the new Volvo through a blizzard on glistening streets, trying to get to Abigail. His pulse was inexplicably pounding in his throat like the snow on his windows, and he watched the wiper blades swipe forth and back, back and forth… fighting the onslaught that he could not. It made no sense to perch so frigidly on edge; he had driven at haphazard speeds in similar weather, back and forth from Wolf Trap to Baltimore to Quantico, sometimes lost so deep within his mind that time blinked in and out along with the headlights. This leisurely cruise was no challenge, yet the stakes felt high. Everything he did felt intoxicatingly dangerous these days. He swallowed, flexing his chilled fingers in leather gloves to calm himself.

On a passionate impulse that he could defend to his heart but not his conscience, Will had agreed to leave with Hannibal that intimate night at dinner. He had known approximately what would happen next. The FBI had no usable evidence against Hannibal, but Jack knew the truth and it had only been a matter of time. The sun had risen, news of their absence spread, and fleeing made Hannibal look plenty guilty. Seething at the change of plans, Jack must have finally taken the case to Prurnell, gotten a search warrant, and found his former friend’s damning basement lair.

Sure enough, the FBI issued a warrant for Hannibal and Will’s arrests, but by that time they were long since out of the country. In the wee hours of the morning almost a month ago, they had driven this very car, owned under one of Hannibal’s aliases with New York plates, across the bridge into Ontario. In a state of wariness that had never yet left him, Will got lost in the surrounding water’s roar. Coloured lights cast the thundering crest of Niagara Falls in an eerie glow, a beacon of hypnotic death.

Will was far beyond his quiet stream, now. Hannibal had reached across the console and brushed their fingers together in some form of reassurance, perhaps a promise.

“You are safe, Will,” he whispered.

Will had opened his window to breathe the chilly, mist-soaked air. Abigail was fast asleep in the back seat, so trusting and sure. She had come into the dining room that night, very much alive though lacking an ear, and flung herself into Will’s arms. Hannibal’s smug look in that moment would never leave his memory, because genuine hope and affection lingered there too. Will’s relief and joy quickly eclipsed his anger, and he stared back at the Chesapeake Ripper in baffled awe, tears threatening to fall.

In the present, Will just kept scanning the road and driving, grateful for the automatic and focused task. He refused to get in an accident or pulled over; that would ruin everything. Pulling up to the cafe with its golden glow from the windows, relief settled in when Abigail hunched against the wind and shuffled into the passenger seat.

“Abigail, are you okay?” She buckled her seatbelt. Her coat was black, but Will could still see the stiff, sticky patches of blood. “Want to talk about it?”

She avoided his eyes, instead staring out at the dark as she sat up straight, her hands resting gracefully on her lap. She looked so small.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Sorry I didn’t think to get you a coffee. It’s not even that good, anyway.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Will’s mouth gave a twitch that might have been a smile. “We’ve both spoiled our taste in coffee with Hannibal’s pretentious bullshit.”

Abigail grinned, briefly sliding her stare his way. “His coffee is delicious, though.”

The knot in Will’s chest loosened at her teasing, and he snickered. Here, behind the veil, all they could do was relax, joke, and accept their ethereal reality. In Will’s stream, the woods surrounding kept guard and bustled with alternate paths, but in the pleasantly cold tunnels behind Niagara Falls, nothing existed but the water and smooth stone on every side; you could get up close, touch the storm, and it would either cave in to crush you or it wouldn’t.

Will and Abigail spent the drive in comfortable quiet, both sensing the other’s tension and knowing what they needed. Settling into heated seats, they loosened their grips and breathed more deeply as the evening sky raged outside.

Niagara on the Lake, population eighteen-thousand, cuddled up between Lake Ontario and the northern mouth of the river. The area hosted battles in the War of 1812, and now the town ran tours for people seeking its ghosts. Much of the architecture was old and grand, with gardens that surely flourished in spring, and every storefront had charming, old-fashioned flair —even the fast food joints. Much to Hannibal’s liking, Niagara was famous for its vineyards and wineries, and he would enjoy touring should they stay long enough for the season to begin.

They only planned to live in Canada until the buzz about them died down. Few in the States would expect them to have stayed close by, so the search was already overseas and doomed to fail.

Pulling into their driveway, Will let his guard down, drifting through the snow towards their ostentatious Georgian home and stomping his boots inside. The lake was on display through every symmetrical back window. Ice disguised it as far as the eye could see, waiting for someone to mistake it for a stretch of land and fall to their death. The landscape implied that they alone inhabited this little pocket of whatever Hannibal deemed reality to be.

“Hannibal?” Abigail called. “Hey, we’re back.”

“In the study, darlings,” came the muffled reply, because he refused to raise his voice.

Will refused to address the warmth curling in his belly as that endearment slipped from such a wicked tongue. Surely it didn't mean anything.

Yet… the scene he and Abigail wandered into made Will melt like wax. Hannibal stood before an eye-level shelf, studying an assortment of scented candles. Several were already lit, seemingly strategic in their combinations to produce the nicest cocktail of aromas. Delicately sniffing at the air, Hannibal furrowed his brow at one and snuffed it out with his fingertips, then struck a fresh match and eyed the flicker between deft fingers. Matches smelled of sun-baked wood chips and gravel. He selected another candle and lit it before blowing the match out and turning with a smile.

"Hello, Will. Abigail. I trust the drive passed in good humour?"

Abigail nodded, mouth wiggling into a grin. "Whatcha' doin'?"

He grinned back as if pleased with himself. "I took a liking to the candle Will bought you for Christmas, so I've purchased more to experience all they have to offer."

Will thought he should have laughed, but he didn't. He'd bought that candle on a last-minute whim because he didn't know what else to give. Seeing Hannibal light and smother a dozen of them now was like watching a cat bat things off of high places, only to stare unblinkingly down as if it were the floor's fault. It was adorable, and Will bit back whatever lovesick nonsense wanted to escape his mouth. His life was a horror movie, but he seemed to have stumbled onto the wrong soundstage.

Abigail smiled fully and flitted over to give Hannibal a one-armed hug. "A new guilty pleasure, Doctor?"

He tipped his head and corrected, "Pleasure should never be guilty, Abigail. Are you alright?"

"Better now," she promised, looking from him to Will and back again. "I'm gonna' go clean up."

Hannibal nodded. "Put on something nice for dinner, please."

After watching her go, he locked his eyes on Will.

Snatching up the first word, Will cleared his throat. "Did you know it would storm?"

"Checking the forecast is not that momentous a task, Will. I could smell the snow several hours in advance."

"So, you were happy to let her walk home alone in the freezing cold? In the dark? In this town we know nothing about?"

Hannibal licked his fingertips and pinched them to smother more tiny flames. Will repressed a brief, trembling fantasy of that tongue on… He swallowed. Now was not the time. Hannibal's reply grounded him.

“As it happens, I have spent time in this area and found it nothing but respectable. I visit to sample wine every summer when it suits me. We are safe here, and Abigail is more than capable of looking out for herself.”

Will took a long breath and rubbed his face with both hands. Nick Boyle’s ghost stood pitch-eyed, frostbitten, and pale-lipped in a dim corner of the room. The snow outside reflected any light it could catch, casting the space in cemetery silver and Ship-of-Dreams gold. His flesh caved in with a mucky *squelch* around Will’s blade, as he stood in Abigail’s shoes and smeared tacky blood on his hands.

Hannibal spoke again, sounding farther away when in reality, he had stepped closer and set a hand on Will’s shoulder. “If you recall, Will, she insisted on walking alone in the first place. She refused our help.”

Will shrugged him off. “Of course Hannibal ‘eat the rude’ Lecter blames a teenage girl for potentially being attacked or freezing to death.”

Hannibal sighed. “I knew that she would call us to drive her home. The situation proved a valuable lesson in forward-thinking for her. Next time, she will check the weather and act accordingly, rather than valuing impulsive excursions over her safety.”

“You want her to need us for every little thing.”

“She has her own car, which she chose not to use.”

Will tugged absently on his own hair, beginning to pace. “We should have just insisted on her driving there no matter what she said! What’s best for her isn’t always what she wants. What’s… what she wants isn’t always what’s best.”

Hannibal blinked, staring for an excruciating series of moments that flayed Will alive. He wanted to melt out of his skin and bones before his companion had a chance to reach his brain.

“I suspect you aren’t truly upset about Abigail’s misadventure, Will.”

“Yeah? Then what would I be upset about?”

“Are you having second thoughts about our circumstances? You’ve been reserved but seemingly content since we arrived.”

“The time for second thoughts was at your table in Baltimore.” Will took a deep breath and met those enthralling garnet eyes. “No, Hannibal. I’m here with you, but I do feel… guilty.”

Will broke his gaze away. This time, Hannibal studied him with as close as he got to compassion. They recalled the moment before Will’s seizure in the dining room so many months ago, and true to form, Hannibal took the excuse to touch Will’s face. He smoothed his thumb across Will’s cheekbone, and Will fought to keep his mouth from falling open. The touch was soft and slightly calloused, deadly volts of electricity hidden in slim wires.

Will whispered, “I feel like I don’t deserve this. Like I’m dreaming, and we’ll both wake up in prison cells any minute. Or you will, and I’ll be stuck under Jack’s thumb again.”

Under Jack’s thumb instead of this one.

“And what is this, Will?”

“It’s some kind of dance I can’t keep up with. The ballroom floor is ice, and I’m the only one without skates.”

Hannibal licked his lips, thinking. Will wondered if he did that on purpose, if he knew what he did. Will had dressed up to resume his therapy thinking that mirroring the doctor would create trust: a halo effect of sorts. When Hannibal opened his office door to find Will batting his eyelashes, was that brief, carmine spark attraction or suspicion?

Hannibal asked, “Are you keeping the room cold to preserve the ice?”

“I… feel like the heat cranks up every day, but I’m the only one who feels it. The ice isn’t melting, and I’m just getting more and more sweaty and tired.”

“I see. Tell me, Will, do you enjoy watching the dance?

“Yes.” Oh god, yes. “But I want to join in.”

“Then why do you not? What did I say earlier, to Abigail?”

Will swallowed. “Pleasure should never be guilty. Once I join in, I’ll never stop.”

They both already knew this, but reviewing it gave Will a stable place to leap from.

Hannibal mused, “You had the same fear before killing Garret Jacob Hobbs, then you killed Randall Tier, and did that not make you feel alive? Did it not bring you pleasure? Perhaps never stopping is what you need. Here, in this house, you have attempted to stop again and nearly tripped. The ice has finally begun to melt, and you are turning the thermostat back and forth, unable to commit to one outcome.”

“I’ve committed to *you* . And Abigail. I wouldn’t be here if…”

Hannibal gently pulled his hand away and silenced another candle. Then, he sauntered to a large cabinet across the room, poured them both glasses of red wine, and their fingers brushed when he passed one to Will.

“Commit to yourself, darling,” he murmured. His *voice*… Will wanted to guzzle every drop of the sound. He was still lost in the words *“...bring you pleasure”* tiptoeing on the air.

His gut tightened like the twisted ropes around that charcoal-coloured tree, ready to crush and crumble his resolve. They clinked their glasses together and raised them to sip, but he gripped his hard enough to shatter it. Red exploded over his skin and onto the floor. Before he could think, he arched forward and dragged Hannibal down by the back of his neck, nails digging in covered in wine and sliced flesh.

At once, the kiss was lavish and scorching, neither wasting a second. Hannibal's free arm crushed Will close as his glass tipped and spilled, but he let it topple to the floor and shatter in turn as he picked Will up and set him on the desk: an elaborate wooden altar that outdid the one from his old office. He stood wrapped in Will's legs and pressed their bodies flush, drawing every kiss out like the moment before sunrise bloomed bloody on the horizon.

Strong hands smoothed over Will's lower back, up beneath his shirt and summoning heat. Where a moment ago he had been tense with desperation, his muscles went limp and he let his partner hold him up. His legs fell open wider. Every second melted into the next, nothing at all standing between this immutable bond that blurred them. Will sang his praises, shameless and undone, until his throat was sore with the effort of keeping quiet enough that Abigail wouldn't hear. The long, broken sounds felt just as good as being touched, finally falling free from his chest and leaving his head breathlessly light.

"Wind me up and watch me go," he whispered through an adoring moan. "I'll go however you want... *Fuck* , kiss me."

Hannibal obliged, satisfyingly breathless, then licked his own lips. "That is not completely true. You would never let me dictate your actions, nor would I want you to."

"Yeah, that might have been impulsive. We're not talking about killing, just… this."

They paused to collect themselves, gasping, and Hannibal was nuzzling Will's throat and hair as if he had lost control of the motion entirely. He whispered Will's name over and over, rambling reverie in several languages until they were hard to differentiate. Will slumped back, leaning on one straight arm with the other still slung around Hannibal's shoulders.

"I should have done that on the ladder," Will said. "I should've done it in your kitchen and in the barn…" He gripped Hannibal's hair tightly and pulled him up to meet his eyes. "But I'm still not sorry for trying to kill you. I know you're not sorry for messing with my brain or getting me locked up or anything else. If you want this, that all stops and we're even, got it?"

Hannibal's bangs fell in his eyes, which were darkened and shining under sleepy lids. Flushed, pouty lips opened with a mortal's need to breathe, and eventually he said, "I will not tolerate you trying to control me, Will, but I will extend you reciprocal courtesy. As I have said, I do not wish to control you, only guide you in honesty. I have no desire to hurt you again. Unless, of course, you ask me to."

The implications of those last words made Will whine gently and kiss him again. He sank his teeth into Hannibal's bottom lip, coaxing growls from the backs of their throats, and they folded together again like blue and red becoming purple.

Abigail called, "Hannibal, when's dinner ready?" from down the hall, and they broke apart to hurriedly fix their hair and clothing. It likely didn't matter, though; their faces were pink, their breathing erratic, and Abigail wasn't stupid.

"Just a moment," Hannibal replied. "Would you please add two extra place settings to the table?"

Will, focusing his vision and standing on wobbly feet, processed this request more slowly than he normally would. He cleared his throat. “Are… we having company?”

Hannibal shot him a lively grin just as Abigail came in and asked, “What for?”

“My sister, Mischa, and her daughter informed me yesterday that they are coming to visit. Their flight from Paris was later than expected in this weather. I hope you don’t mind the surprise.”

Will’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. He raked a hand through his hair, his face warmed under waiting eyes, and he cleared his throat. “Uh, isn’t it a little early for guests? We’re barely settled here. Does… Jack know you have a sister?”

Hannibal was unbothered, pouring himself another glass of wine. He moved with the languid pride and calm of a predator who knew where it belonged and what belonged to it. Abigail’s eyes flicked to the shattered crime scene on the floor, but she said nothing.

“Yes, Jack is aware. He has been in contact with her, asking after my whereabouts or other pertinent information, and she made it clear that she wants nothing to do with us. Uncle Jack believes that she knew nothing of my activities in America, and law enforcement has no valid cause to suspect her or violate her privacy. I trust her with my life.”

Will took another steadying breath, then nodded. Hannibal spoke about his sister with softness and nostalgia that twined through the air like a lullaby. Between the passionate kiss and Hannibal’s pre-existing good mood, the space around them glowed with cinnamon and vanilla light.

Will had one more concern. “Wait, she has a daughter?”

Hannibal grinned a little. “You know, Will, you worry too much.” He turned to Abigail. “My niece is your age, Abigail. Perhaps you will find you relate to her.”

She considered this. “So, I have a cousin now.”

“If you wish to see it that way, yes.”

Her lips quirked into a hesitant smile before fading back. “I’ve never had siblings or cousins. My dad broke off from his family, and my mom was an only child.”

For a moment, Hannibal came down from his aloof euphoria and rested an affectionate hand on Abigail’s neck. He forgave her subtle flinch and said, “Will and I wish to give you everything you once lacked. I hope you enjoy Miss Emmaline’s company.”

Will nodded in assent, though he wondered what Emmaline Lecter’s life must be like. Perhaps this meeting would be good for Abigail, and for Will to adjust to the concept of family.

Abigail’s smile was full this time. “I’ll go set the table.”

Will said, “We’ll join you in a minute.”

She hurried from the room and Hannibal smiled after her. Then, he turned to Will, serious yet hopeful.

“You don’t object? I’d hoped you could one day meet my sister, but I realize you may react poorly to such an ambush so soon.”

Will blushed. “Well, dinner with the in-laws…”

The second the words left his mouth, they cut off his air. Hannibal froze, almost imperceptibly, but he pressed the tip of his tongue between his lips for a moment, and his eyes took on a far away glitter. Will had caught this dead giveaway the first time they met for therapy: Hannibal did it when he was thinking, intrigued, pleased… They stood in tense silence for a moment, the runaway line of a pen in a startled hand.

“Will…”

Will coughed, though he didn’t really need to. “I was… I mean, I was mostly joking. I mean, our fake IDs are… a couple, so if we were… *that* , it would make Mischa my sister-in-law… but I wasn’t thinking. I don’t know… Sorry that just came out like that.”

Hannibal took a step into his space, so Will leaned on the desk again and looked up at him. He set his hands on either side of Will’s hips and studied him. The lingering ghost of their kiss came rushing back to their awareness in full force, but it had never really left.

“Do you see us as family, Will?”

Will licked his own lips and stared at Hannibal’s throat rather than his eyes. Finally, he glanced up through his lashes and raised a brow, knowing that the little flirt was always well-received. Clearly, the energy between them in Baltimore had been attraction, perhaps slightly more so than suspicion, but now Hannibal balanced on the edge of a precipice, afraid to truly let his well-built guard down and dare to hope for…

Will whispered, “I can’t imagine what else we would be.”

He reached up to cradle Hannibal’s face in one hand, and Hannibal tipped his head to kiss Will’s palm, mouth impossibly plush and tender on warm skin. They both shut their eyes and snuggled into the offered embrace, clinging to one another for uncountable minutes, breathing in the scent of mutually hot and rushing blood.

“Will… Oh, Will…”

“I’m here, Hannibal. I never thought family was something I wanted, and everything it took us to get here made me reject the idea even more. I’m sorry about the plot with Jack. I felt so betrayed… and I was about to do the same to you. Thank you for giving me a chance.”

“Thank you for taking the chance. I will make it worth your while.”

“It already is. I like it here. It’s cozy. I want to see the lake in summer.”

“Then we shall stay as long as you like.”

Will kissed him with a hushed murmur of drowsy glee.

Reluctantly, Hannibal was the first to stand up straight, taking Will's hand to inspect it. He said, "You're bleeding. Come, these cuts need stitches."

"Yes, Doctor Lecter."

The wine glass had carved into his skin in several places as it shattered. Caught up in the moment, he hadn't noticed the pain, but now the smooth cuts were throbbing. He chuckled weakly at his own idiocy as they stumbled to the bathroom for medical supplies. Hannibal picked out shards of glass, cleaned the cuts, and sutured the worst of them with detached precision.

"Thank you," Will whispered, earning him kisses to his wrists.

Hannibal looked up into his face for the first time in minutes. "I hoped to do that the night you killed Mr. Tier, and I tended to your hands much the same."

Had that only been a few weeks ago? In a moment of clarity, it hit Will how grateful he was to have made this decision. It felt like hot fudge and whipped cream in his chest. Hannibal seemed to understand, taking the damaged hand and squeezing it just enough to cause a sharp spark of pain. The pleased gasp Will freed shocked them both, but they were running out of time before their guests arrived.

Hopping onto another train of thought, Hannibal studied Will's jeans and damp grey turtleneck. "You're gorgeous, beloved, but do you wish to change for dinner? I'd love to show you off in that navy blue suit you have yet to wear."

Will laughed, catching his breath. "I'm not wearing a tie."

"I trust your judgement. I will clean up the wine and join you shortly."

With a final quick peck to Hannibal's mouth, Will slipped upstairs to change, finding himself empowered by the smart lines and rich colours that flattered his figure. Hannibal had done all their clothes shopping because he enjoyed it, but with the new revelations between them now, Will suspected that his partner's selections were not entirely selfless. He styled his hair with unexpected nerves, never before one to care about first impressions. Mischa was important to Hannibal, so Will wanted to do his best.

Hannibal knocked on his bedroom door dressed in one of his favourite suits: the burgundy and black one with a silver and red-splashed tie.

"I couldn't bear to leave it behind," he said, nearly reading Will's mind.

Will grinned and mumbled, "You're *devastating* . Always have been."

"As are you." Hannibal offered his elbow with a look of disbelieving awe. "Shall we?"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Abigail arranged her hair to cover the thumb-sized scrap of flesh where her ear should have been. She kept it shoulder-length for this very purpose, though she longed to try a rebellious pixie cut. The nonexistent “Carly Lavelle” would probably have short hair, but Abigail was not Carly. She couldn’t draw attention to such a defining trait as the missing shell. The new name Hannibal chose for her meant “free woman,” but she knew better.

She gathered oxygen into her lungs, focusing on the mundane yet miraculous action of her body to try and gain control of her thoughts. A cousin her age, and an aunt… family. If they were anything like Hannibal, she would do well to be polite and presentable, but she felt like she was about to walk into a sitcom drama. Family dinners were often the fodder of such things, notorious for ending poorly, but those didn’t involve Hannibal Lecter. He would manage the whole thing like theatre to go off without a hitch, and all Abigail had to do was keep alert and savour the food.

That, she could handle.

Footsteps shuffled in the hall towards Will’s room, and she hopped up to open her door.

“Will?”

He was blatantly flustered, unkempt, and his hands were covered in fresh stitches and Steri-Strips. Regardless, he was beaming. “Hey, Abigail. You look nice.”

“Thanks. What happened?”

He looked at his hands as if realizing they existed. “Uh, my wine glass broke.”

Abigail giggled. “You kissed him, didn’t you?”

He spluttered excuses for a moment before dissolving into gentle laughter. “Yeah.”

“I guess I owe Freddie Lounds fifty bucks.”

Will grimaced at the mention of the obnoxious journalist, but it didn’t last long. Nothing could sour his mood at the moment. Abigail’s heart fluttered.

She asked, “Are you happy?”

He looked down at his feet, adjusting to such a rare, long-lasting smile as if it were a new pair of shoes. “Yes, I am.”

Abigail hugged him with a swift pat on the back, and he relaxed into it briefly before wandering off to his room.

About ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. Hannibal and Will swept down the stairs, arm-in-arm in perfect suits, Abigail behind them and fidgeting with the cuffs of her dress. She wore a simple navy A-line with long sleeves and a knee-length skirt, and the matching sash tied around her waist made her feel a bit like a porcelain doll. It was all slapped on over her frazzled inner workings, having barely gotten the cafe scene out of her head.

Their stately foyer smelled of sweet and savoury things: warm honey glaze on fresh bread, vegetables seasoned in spices she couldn't pronounce, the cozy, hearty starch of something involving potatoes… but no meat. The house was warm with thriving fire, all of it battling the slightest intrusion of winter chill.

Will passed Abigail an encouraging look as she settled in beside him, and Hannibal winked at her before letting Will go to open the door.

They all jumped when a lightning flash of a woman nearly tackled Hannibal into a hug. Despite being two thirds of his size, she squeezed the breath out of him as well as she was able, then whipped her hand up to smack his face before scolding him in Lithuanian. Judging by Mischa's tone, Abigail suspected she was calling him an idiot and saying how worried she was. Hannibal's expression remained cool and fond, if a little ruffled. Abigail could sense Will's empathy curling out around their feet, cataloguing, though his face gave away nothing but polite interest.

The siblings did not look much alike, Mischa's profile and silhouette being much less severe, but she had the same model's cheekbones. If math served, she was thirty-nine: six years younger than her brother. A low bun pinned up her muted blonde hair, but she had left a few stray curls out around her ears.

Hannibal smiled and looked around the group. "Mischa, this is my partner Will Graham, and our daughter Abigail. Will, Abigail, my sister Mischa."

Mischa turned to them with laughter in her large blue eyes. "Hello! Hannibal hasn't shut up about you for months, and I started to think he was spinning lies."

While Hannibal's accent could be described as ambiguously European, Mischa's was more distinctly French from decades immersed in Paris.

"Hello," Abigail answered. "He doesn't shut up about you either."

Mischa laughed, Will smirked, and Hannibal blushed.

Will nodded, hands in his pockets. "Nice to meet you, Mischa."

She grinned, a slow and curious thing. Her arms in a sleek white ski jacket, she hugged him as well, and Will stiffly met Hannibal's eyes over her head. She patted the side of Will's face and looked him up and down, giggling companionably. "Poor thing, I can smell your anxiety. Don't worry, I won't bite."

Will chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. "So, the nose is genetic, then?"

Hannibal tipped his head to the side, proud. “Apparently.”

Mischa absently slipped out of her coat and handed it to him. Then, she looked back at Will and said, “It’s nice to finally meet you, Will, but I do harbour some concern over Hannibal’s taste in men. It’s just like him to flirt with chance for an FBI agent of all people.”

She and Will studied each other for a moment before he responded. “I’m not FBI anymore. Never really was. He’s safe with me.”

“And you’re safe with him?” she pushed with an abundance of cheek.

“Who said that’s what I’m looking for?”

Mischa’s grin relaxed, eyes unveiled as if Will had passed some kind of test. However, it carried the veneer of rehearsal. She said, “Sorry for being so blunt right away. I can’t stand an elephant in the room.”

Abigail wouldn’t call the trademark Lecter innuendos “blunt,” but she supposed they were more obvious than elaborate metaphors. Regardless, the remark cozied up the room immediately. It seemed they were all on the same calligraphed page. Hannibal hung up Mischa’s coat, grinning like a dork, then rested one arm around Will’s waist.

Mischa turned her head back to the open door, something like concern crossed her face, and she said, “Emmaline, come inside, honey. It’s freezing.”

A pink-faced, willowy girl shuffled in with a white woollen scarf covering her below the eyes. Pale brown hair murmured in waist-length waves from under a fluffy pom-pom beanie, and her mittened hand gripped the handle of her suitcase so tightly that her knuckles would be white as well. She looked like a piece of the winter had detached from the sky. Hannibal observed her politely, Will surveyed everything curiously, and Abigail tried not to gnaw her lip with the nerves of being around someone her own age again.

Emmaline unwound her scarf and removed her hat, avoiding meeting anyone’s eyes. Hers were brown, though lacking the golden and maroon tints of her uncle’s. Taller than Mischa or Abigail, she had a slim, uncertain face that was pretty in an unmemorable way, and she stood like a bird on its perch while her eyes wandered the room.

After a long moment, she cleared her throat and looked at Hannibal. “Hello.”

He smiled without teeth, more amused than happy. “Hello, Emmaline.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and introduced her to Will and Abigail, while Emmaline stood frozen and trying not to show it.

Abigail pulled out her smile, the same one she gave Elise Nichols on that train. “Hi, Emmaline. Nice to meet you.”

Emmaline’s smile was equally humourless. “You’re Abigail Hobbs. I read about you and the Minnesota Shrike.”

“That’s… the past. It’s Lecter-Graham now.”

The other girl blinked. “Looks like you stepped from one crazy reality into a crazier one.” She turned to Will. “I’ve read about you too. The guy who didn’t kill anyone.”

He cocked his head and shrugged. “Not anymore.”

She unexpectedly barked a laugh. “No, I guess not.”

Hannibal’s smirk, growing since his guests’ arrival, was ready to move out alone and start a career. He looked around to everyone, eyes lingering on Will, and said, “Let us converse over dinner, lest the food get cold. Mischa, I’m sure you would both like to freshen up beforehand, so please do lay claim to whichever guest rooms you would like. You will find them up the stairs and to the left. Will and Abigail, if you’ll follow me.”

With that, he turned to the kitchen, gliding with an air of authority that left no room for questions. Mischa and Emmaline finished shedding their winter gear, and Abigail kept the corner of her eye on them as they disappeared up the grand staircase.

. . .

Hannibal made a splendid show of plating their food, surrounding tidy slices of vegetable pot pie with swirls of scalloped potatoes in creamy, off-white sauce. The sauce smelled like it would melt on the tongue, and the pie crust was layered in elaborate patterns. Everything was perfectly spiced and portioned, with vibrant shades of green, orange, and yellow spilling from moist and flaky crust. To balance out the colours in a largely beige palate, he had mingled vegetables and subtle spices in strategic locations around the circles.

Abigail watched, leaning on the counter, and Will wandered the room before abruptly stopping at Hannibal’s back. They were close and nearly touching back to chest; even if Abigail had been half asleep, she could not have missed Hannibal’s shift in focus.

Will studied the food and licked his lips. “Looks amazing. Sort of unlike you, though. Mischa must be a vegetarian?”

Vaguely wistful, he murmured, “She prefers not to eat meat.”

Abigail understood that sentiment, but she generally trusted what she ate these days. Hannibal would be a fool to kill anyone in a small town so soon after his identity got out to the masses, but several times in passing he had mentioned wanting to visit Toronto. In those crowds, shadowed in the eyes of old concrete and shining glass, he could stalk like a jaguar in grass. On a clear day, the city skyline appeared on the horizon of the lake, silver and tiny with the CN Tower pointing north, inviting.

“She doesn’t trust me,” Will said after a while.

Hannibal took his hands kindly. “Please be patient with her, darling. Mischa is protective of me just as I am of her. She will likely never admit to holding you in high regard for having caught my eye.”

Will blushed and nodded, then Hannibal stroked a thumb over Will's knuckles, and Abigail was torn between teasing them and cooing over how sweet it was. In a darker corner of her mind, she mulled over the fact that she might as well not exist in this moment. Will and Hannibal were each others' entire worlds.

"So, how long are they staying?" she asked, breaking the sudden quiet.

"Perhaps three weeks, if everyone is amenable," Hannibal replied, turning back to his work. "If you both enjoy her company, I would love to see Mischa more often when we move to Europe. Perhaps we might live in France for a time, though I've promised Will we can stay here until he wishes otherwise."

Abigail's brow tensed, and she knew she was scowling. She looked at each of her fathers and back again. "You didn't bother to ask my opinion on that?"

Will scratched the back of his neck, moving to lean on the counter across from her. "We thought you wouldn't mind. Do you not like it here?"

She sighed. "It's nice, but I was hoping to start classes somewhere else in the fall. I assume it's too late for applications and acceptance here?"

Hannibal nodded. "The application deadline in this province was January fifteenth."

That had only been yesterday.

Abigail's glare iced over even more. "You knew that, and you kept it from me."

"You did not do your own research," Hannibal countered.

Will cut in, "Hannibal, her thoughts have been a little occupied adjusting to an entirely new life. We've all been in a funk for three weeks."

"I have been in no such state."

Abigail sighed, dreary. "I'm not prepared this year, anyway. I'm too… paranoid to focus on school or build a social life."

Before Hannibal offered her lofty assurances that could not be proven, Will said, "That's okay, Abigail. We'll figure it out. What do you want to study?"

Hannibal added, "I recall you saying you wished to work for the FBI."

Abigail snorted back, "Well, *that's* never going to happen, is it?"

"I sincerely apologize in that respect."

"Me too," Will said.

She just rolled her eyes. "I can't imagine you two are in a rush to see me start school. Can't have me associating with anyone other than you."

Hannibal looked at her, unblinking. “I expect you to be careful, Abigail. That is all. It is unlikely that anyone here or overseas would recognize you, but the possibility exists. Your face was in the news about your father.”

Will said, “We promised that you can go to school in Europe. It’ll be a good new experience.”

Abigail tried to be snarky, but her words came out in a soft laugh. “I’ve had enough new experiences this year to last a lifetime.”

Will’s sympathetic smile had an edge of dark humour that felt like home.

Hannibal said, “One can never live too much. Now, our guests await. Take your seats, please, and I will join you in a moment.”

He kissed the top of her head, then took Will’s lips for a moment longer than could be considered casual. Abigail grinned and shouldered between them for a group hug. In a rare feat, this made Hannibal laugh. She and Will left the room a moment later, but Will kept glancing over his shoulder, floating on a cloud.

Abigail rolled her eyes, still smiling. “Can you stop with the gooey eyes? You know he‘s a dangerous murderer?”

Will’s hand fell on his chest in mock offence. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Impulsively, she hugged around his waist like a magnet, and he set a hand on her back as if they were exchanging courage and confidence.

. . .

Will and Abigail rounded a corner into the dining room and found Mischa and Emmaline already seated, with Mischa to the right of Hannibal’s spot at the head of the table. Emmaline was to her right, and Abigail sat herself across from the other girl. Will considered which of the two remaining spots to take, suspecting that it said something or other about status. The opposite head of the table put him and Hannibal on equal standing as hosts, while the spot to Hannibal’s left would make the whole group feel closer together, less formal, and less confronting. Will ultimately chose the spot at Hannibal’s left, desperate to feel his warmth and mimic his strong, calm demeanor. If Will couldn’t keep himself together, he would have to suffer Hannibal’s disappointment, Mischa’s smugness, and more of the two girls’ emanating awkwardness. Would Hannibal be disappointed if this evening went poorly, or simply entertained?

Once everyone settled in with the scuffed sound of chair legs, Mischa nodded at him and he nodded back. The silence was companionable in the manufactured way of politicians.

Let the show begin.

. . .

Thankfully, it only took a moment for Hannibal to make his entrance, balancing two plates on each arm with the fifth in his hand. This did not hinder his grace in the slightest, and he served them all while narrating about the dishes, their ingredients, and their origins. The familiar routine soothed Abigail, and everyone at the table seemed to warm as their senses took precedence.

Mischa looked up at her brother and smiled. “Thank you. As much as I hate to stroke your ego, this looks divine as always.”

Hannibal smiled back, and it crinkled around his eyes in a rare way, but he refrained from showing his teeth. Abigail was proud of how she recognized this sign of his lingering nerves. She tried to be discreet about studying Emmaline, even sizing her up. Emmaline’s eyes flicked to Hannibal, who did not seem to expect much of a response from her. He simply nodded, polite and aloof towards his niece. She seemed desperate to remain small in her chair.

Hannibal rested his subtly tapping fingers on the back of his chair for a moment, surveyed the scene to ensure all was to his liking, then took his seat.

“Bon appetit,” he said. Then, he glanced at Will as if for approval and took the first bite.

Will smiled at him, tasted his own food, and whispered, “Perfect.”

With that, more ice broke. With Hannibal satisfied, everyone could enjoy their meals in earnest, but none were in a hurry to breach conversation. Every so often, Mischa and Will would eye one another as if they were not both aware of it.

Abigail tasted the vegetable pie, and the crust was flaky, soft, and unassumingly sweet, balancing out the texture and tang of greens. She gasped and her cheeks nearly flushed. Her birth parents had cooked frozen vegetables and boxed lasagnas, but the food had been bland in texture and lacking in flavour. Hannibal made every effort of the tongue an adventure.

Mischa hummed. “It’s delicious. I’ve been craving your cooking all day, Han. Especially after the airline food. That stuff goes down like jello or kinetic sand. There’s no in between.”

Hannibal grinned and batted faux-innocent lashes. “Do you hate airline food more than lobster?”

Mischa slammed her fork down with a clatter, shrieking with laughter. “Bastard, shut your mouth! I walked right into that.”

She got a grip on herself while Hannibal smiled around another tidy bite. Abigail and Will shared a look, suddenly outsiders.

Will chuckled awkwardly. “Uh, care to explain?”

Hannibal grinned at him, then Mischa and back again. “Apologies, Will. It’s somewhat of an inside joke. Mischa is most entertaining on pain medication, and shortly before Emmaline was born, she started rambling on about how lobsters are the most, and I quote, ‘horrendous

alien creatures to ever have beady eyes.' Among other things. I have never let her live it down."

Mischa rolled her own eyes and focused steadfastly on chewing. Abigail giggled, and though Will seemed not to care about the anecdote, he was clearly pleased to see Hannibal enjoying himself.

They made getting-to-know-you small talk about work and life. Mischa was a costume designer for stage productions, and Emmaline was in the twelfth grade. She mumbled about wanting to go into teaching, and Hannibal seemed to overlook her air of antisocial rudeness.

Over savoury sweet homemade ice cream and fresh fruit, with a decently open air established around everyone, Will took a sip of wine and asked, "So, what made you two decide to visit now?"

Mischa did not look up from her elaborate ice cream dish. "Things got itchy back home once people linked us to Mr. Cannot Keep A Low Profile here, and Emmaline was having a hard time among her peers because of the association. We thought it was smart to get away for a bit."

"And walk directly into the cause of all your troubles?"

Her eyes flashed up to his, a light switching on in a cave as she said, "I do not blame Hannibal for his exposure. Despite my poking at his theatricality, he's always been entirely secure in his affairs."

The clinking of silverware ceased for a count of four.

Hannibal murmured, "I harbour no ire toward Will's presence in my life, Mischa. Quite the opposite, in fact. Do contain your tongue at my table. This was going so well." He joined stares with his sister, then his lover before looking back at his dish and preparing another bite. "Unless you wish to resolve your differences in a worthwhile manner, you are to treat one another with courtesy."

Abigail dared not step into this. Who knew what Hannibal deemed "a worthwhile manner" of resolving conflict? He always seemed to favour the instigation of it. Perhaps this was important enough to him that he would not gamble with it.

Emmaline cleared her throat and mumbled, "Mum also wanted to be here in time for Hannibal's birthday."

One couldn't blame her for wanting to change the subject, but Hannibal closed his eyes in a long-suffering way. Will donned an affectionate, incredulous look and raised a brow at him.

"It's almost your birthday?"

"January twentieth," Mischa said. "You ought to know that."

Will ignored her.

Hannibal glanced at him. “I prefer to let the day pass unheeded.”

Mischa grinned. “You’d think such a narcissist would enjoy a day celebrating himself. Hannibal, we have to do something special while we’re here.”

Will nodded, and he kept watching Hannibal in that infatuated way. “I’d like that.”

Hannibal allowed himself a tiny, touched smile. Abigail caught the minute shift of his arm, which gave away his holding Will’s hand under the table. Will visibly stopped breathing.

Abigail’s eyes wandered back to Emmaline, who hadn’t eaten and barely contributed to the conversation. Obviously distracted now, Emmaline placed her hand on the table, tapped it once, then moved it back to her leg. She placed her hand on the table, tapped it once, then moved it back to her leg. She jerked her chin up to the ceiling in a sequence of two, then to her right in a sequence of four. Two. Four. Two. Four. Hannibal and Will politely refrained from staring, but it was clear their attention was now focused on her.

Mischa spoke to her softly in French, but whatever she said didn’t have much effect. Emmaline just looked irritated and humiliated before repeating the routine twice more. Mischa opened her mouth again.

Hannibal finally spoke. “Tell me, Emmaline, what is troubling you?”

Emmaline huffed a self-deprecating laugh. “Ironically, *Doctor Lecter* , it isn’t the food.”

Abigail sucked in a quiet breath.

“I did not think it was and have not taken offense.” Hannibal nodded. “That concern would be rational from your perspective, and the nature of your condition is often fundamentally the opposite.”

Emmaline snorted. “Don’t you consider it *rude* that I didn’t eat?”

Hannibal’s tiny smirk was slow and knowing.

Will glanced from him to Emmaline, then down at his dish. He said, “Nothing you say will shock anyone here.”

Emmaline huffed at Will, “I really don’t want to discuss it because I don’t know you. Didn’t your beau here mess with your head? Get you to act on your scary thoughts? Why would I give him free ammo?”

Hannibal’s grin only widened, chilly amusement sparking maroon and gold.

Will blinked at the waspish girl. “Clearly, you know *some* things about me.”

“Emmaline…” Mischa sighed.

“It’s quite alright, dear Mischa,” Hannibal assured. “As you said, no elephants.” Then, he looked back at Emmaline. “Admittedly, I have toyed with obsessive-compulsive patients

before, of which my Will is not one. I was curious if they could be influenced to commit the acts they so feared, though not the unfortunate sexual ones, of course. Ultimately, I found all the subjects to be steadfast in their resistance. None of them would even hurt a fly. Intrusive thoughts in obsessive compulsive disorder characteristically go against a sufferer's moral compass and true desires. That is why they cause such distress. Will's violent and destructive urges have always been ingrained in his character; I simply coaxed his truth to the surface. You, Emmaline, are benign and thus not easily susceptible to corruption."

Abigail felt the need to contradict Hannibal. She said, "Seemingly harmless people are corrupted all the time."

Mischa shot her an icy look and clarified, "By desperation, not seduction."

Will swirled his wine and quirked a smile. "Seduction and desperation are both honest in their own ways. One could say you were desperate, Abigail."

"I was desperate, but I did want… all this."

Emmaline grit her teeth and said, "If you must know, Hannibal, I'm convinced I can prevent the roof from caving in. It's not like how you fantasize about god-knows-what violence. I *don't belong* in this family."

Hannibal blinked, unfazed. "Do you consider that sense of not belonging to be positive or negative?"

She stood up, rattling the table, and Abigail saw herself. She saw the girl who cowered in Hobbs' kitchen and pleaded with him not to draw that knife any further. Hannibal still didn't seem bothered. Mischa opened her mouth as if to speak to her daughter, but Emmaline just turned away.

"I'm going upstairs. Good *night* ."

Will and Abigail followed her with their eyes until she was out of sight.

Mischa dropped her head to the table and sighed. Hannibal watched. When Mischa sat up, she looked like a floppy, poorly weighted doll.

"I think that's the end of the evening," she said primly.

"I agree." Hannibal took a bite of ice cream, giving it an offended look as if the frozen dessert was at fault for beginning to melt.

Mischa, apologetic and wary, started to say something in Lithuanian, but Hannibal raised a gentle hand and answered in English. "I am simply happy you're here, Mischa. Please do not exclude Will and Abigail with a language barrier; it's impolite."

"Would… you like any help cleaning up?"

"No, thank you. Sleep well."

Then, the original three were seemingly alone in their home once more. A slow, eerie smile crossed Hannibal's face until it lit up his eyes. He went back to his dessert, and Abigail grinned as she imagined his feet swinging merrily with the action.

Will cocked a brow at him and snickered. "Did you just want a show? What other point was there to poking at the girl's psyche?"

Hannibal said, "Things are complicated for Miss Emmaline."

Abigail swallowed, her throat dry. "She hates you, Hannibal. What's to stop her from turning you in? Is this safe?"

He took a sip of his remaining wine, pressing his lips flat. "For Emmaline to turn me in would devastate her mother. Tonight went as well as could be expected. Will, darling, if you would help me clear the table? We will see you in the morning, Abigail."

Abigail nodded, inexplicably light-headed and shaky. Her stomach felt as if she hadn't eaten a thing. How had she thought this would be a good idea? Mischa and Emmaline had disrupted everything, and a large part of her wanted them gone. Life couldn't be thrown off balance again, not when it was nearly so perfect. Yet, another part… the more human and inconvenient part, wanted to get to know Emmaline.

Will still held Hannibal's hand. Abigail rose to kiss them both on the cheek while they sat there looking regal. She turned down the hall and wandered to her room. When the door shut behind her, it was like stepping back into her real life after a dream. She took a deep breath, stretching her lungs until her chest grew sore.

Chapter End Notes

I have OCD, so I'm using my experience even though Emmaline is quite different from me. This fic won't dive very deep into her head, but please know that OCD is much more than what you see on the surface. Intrusive thoughts don't make people dangerous, no matter what the subject. Anything ominous or unsettling you may notice about Emmaline is because she happens to be related to Hannibal Lecter.

With that being said, I hope you'll like her or at least accept her. Let the Murder Family shenanigans begin :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW

"How do you feel that went, Will?"

Hannibal betrayed no expectations or feelings of his own, simply glancing at Will as they cleared the table.

"I don't know if Mischa and I will get along. How much have you told her about me… us… anyway?"

"I frequently spoke with her on the phone during our time in Baltimore. She knows my perception of everything that transpired. In fact, she encouraged me to free you from the BSHCI. Unbecoming as it is, she recognized my deteriorating state after I lost you, and she wouldn't listen to another minute of my so-called 'pathetic pining.'"

Will snorted. "You didn't lose me. You abandoned me."

Hannibal had the gall to look mournful. "She called me a hypocrite. I fear she was right."

"I don't like that she knows more about me than I do about her," Will sighed.

"There is little I keep from her, but that does not mean she knows you. Do not worry, Will. I would never share your thoughts and feelings without your permission. I want them all to myself. You trust me now, and I value that gift highly. Though our relationship has been unorthodox from the start, I strictly upheld doctor-patient confidentiality in that regard."

"Why didn't you talk about Mischa before? You only briefly mentioned her."

Hannibal paused for a moment, thoughtfully studying the window. "I suppose I was maintaining a somewhat distant facade. In sharing my personal life with you, I would have made myself vulnerable before the time was perfect. Now, I wouldn't change a thing. We are all here, now. Ends and means. You and Mischa are threatened by each other."

"I wasn't… I just…" Will ran a hand over his own hair and avoided eye contact. "I feel close to you after that kiss. I, ah… was hoping to get closer tonight, but now we have people here and I have to share your attention."

Hannibal looked one wrong move away from dropping a trio of plates in his stupor. His mouth opened, then closed, and opened just slightly. Will busied himself by moving dirty

forks around, as if balancing them correctly on the plates would unlock a secret room beneath the table that he could vanish into.

“How much closer, Will?”

Will made an indiscernible throat noise. “You’ve been licking your lips and staring at my ass since we met. You want me. I know you do.”

He couldn’t possibly have misread anything here. Their kiss had been heated and screaming for more. Will finally met his eyes and whispered, “I want you, too. I want it all.”

Then, he took his share of the plates and hurried into the kitchen to breathe. He hunched over the sink to wash dishes, and his face grew uncomfortably warm between his blushing and the steaming water. Hannibal stood in the door, watching transfixed.

“Allow me to help,” he offered.

He appeared at Will’s side like a ghost, and they both sensed the shiver of longing at their proximity. They didn’t speak, but Will nodded and shifted to give him space at his side. He realized after the fact that, in his anxiety, he probably dissociated to get those damn dishes done faster. Finally, the sink began to drain, leaving light bubbles in a heap on stainless steel. Will’s stomach felt much the same way. He shut his eyes. Water gurgling and the clock ticking were the only liberating sounds.

Hannibal brushed Will’s curls aside and slowly leaned to kiss behind his ear. The hands on Will’s sides were solid, guarding, and certain. His breath hitched, his hips arched into the counter, and heat spilled in his chest with a groan. The kisses only grew more insistent, starting to suck at skin as Will’s fingers curled, nails gouging his palms.

“H–ann… Ha… *Mnn* . Oh, *fuck* . We… can’t.”

“You still want to, correct?” Hannibal brushed his lips over Will’s neck, just open enough to breathe spiced warmth over blushing skin. Two fingers under Will’s chin brought them suave eye to frantic eye, and Will nodded.

Hannibal hummed, “I agree that our first time as one should be when we are truly alone. When I kissed you, you were so expressive through sound. It’s exquisite. I’d make you sob for me, uninhibited by the fear of anyone hearing…” He paused to kiss along Will’s profile some more, while Will’s entire nervous system flared up like sunlight. “But surely we can be creative in the meantime.”

He rubbed his free hand over the other’s hip with just the right amount of pressure to soothe him, but Will only grew more unhinged. A clever tongue swept the arch of Will’s throat, then Hannibal bit down and Will’s knees threatened to buckle with a shout. His voice cracked, head swimming with static.

“Be creative,” he gasped. “ *Yes* .”

Hannibal smiled, and Will nearly blanched at the devious sparkle in those eyes. What had he gotten himself into? He trusted Hannibal.

Oh, what a *horrible* decision that he couldn't bring himself to regret.

"Very good, Will, but we can't have you making too much noise. As you've said, we mustn't disturb our guests."

Hannibal pulled Will back against his chest and nuzzled the side of his hair, covering his trembling mouth with one hand as he whispered, "For my ears only. Does that suit you?"

Will drew a breath as best he could through his nose, gasping when Hannibal moved the hand back down his other hip to let him speak.

"That suits me very well."

"Good."

With that, Hannibal let go and strode from the room, beckoning two fingers in his wake. A leap of fear nearly knocked Will over as he thought he was being abandoned, but Hannibal clearly meant for him to follow, so he did. He stumbled up the stairs to keep up with Hannibal's smooth stride, and they stopped outside his bedroom door. When it closed, Will was caught in a venus flytrap that would dissolve him entirely. He had not been in Hannibal's bedroom yet, and it was uncharacteristically barren.

"You haven't decorated," Will remarked, trying to distract his nerves.

Hannibal folded him into an embrace against the wall and stroked through his hair. "Then let us make the space interesting."

Their kiss caught the perfect angle, and with a sharp breath, Will grabbed Hannibal's face and took to sucking his upper lip like it would save his life. Nothing could save either of them now. Will's focus bounced back and forth around their bodies as they touched, making his head spin until Hannibal unbuttoned Will's shirt and slipped it off his shoulders out of sight. Inch by inch, their skin snuck into view and pressed together, leaving only the bare minimum of thin boxers behind. Warm air clung to them in a faint sheen of sweat, and Will murmured incoherently as *that damn mouth* ventured down his neck, falling as far as his navel while he kept gasping and scrabbling at Hannibal's shoulders.

"Ha-Han… *mmn* …"

Will blinked his eyes open, bleary and gleaming, and Hannibal smiled conspiratorially. Before Will could reorient his vision, Hannibal pressed him onto his back in cool burgundy sheets and a thick black duvet blocked out the ceiling, smothering them together. The cocoon felt like it would collapse and send Will drowning, so he reached up and locked Hannibal to him for balance. Their bodies got so close that neither could breathe without the other knowing, and Will could not have lifted his hormone-drugged head if he tried.

"Are you comfortable?" Hannibal whispered.

Will took a breath and forced his eyes open. “Mmhm.”

Minutes passed, and Hannibal simply brushed the tip of his nose over sensitive skin, lips grazing and passion long forbidden. The evening hour and void of light made it easier to let go, the intimate darkness more forgiving. He pulled Will’s legs apart to settle where he was welcome between them, then laid an open-mouthed kiss at the pulse of his throat, waiting until Will broke into shivers before moving on with an experimental flex of his hips. Both nearly collapsed at this, and Will cried out brokenly while Hannibal dug his fist into the pillow.

“You are extraordinary, Will,” he cooed. “You’re so beautiful.”

“G-God, Han…”

The weight and grace pressed over Will’s body made him long to be crushed, cut apart, and devoured. Everything tender and repressed inside of him cracked open to reveal the desperate thing writhing beneath. Hannibal nuzzled their faces together, tasting and breathing, occasionally reaching down to tease at soothing Will’s cock.

Will gathered a longer breath, then stretched into the mattress to let hot, damp kisses soak in. They fell further and further down his chest, and he arched his back in supplication with a quiet plea. Hannibal set to his goal, pulling Will’s underwear down, swallowing him in one go, and sucking avidly, sloppily until Will’s mouth dropped open in a silent groan. He pet his fingers through Hannibal’s hair with a high, praising sigh, making a conscious effort to roll his hips even though Hannibal pinned them down and ground his own into the mattress. Will watched the flex and pull of his back with the teasing endeavor, and the muscles and shoulder blades shivered under a firm, wandering touch.

“Oh… that’s it,” Will whispered. His head tipped back over the edge of the pillow, cool sweat sticking dark curls to his skin. “Tha- *aah*... That’s it. More. Han… *Yes* …”

His voice cracked, dragging out the vowel sounds, and he tugged harder at Hannibal’s hair. Hannibal kept him like this for a while without ever letting go, relenting enough to let Will’s shaking subside and then indulging for all it was worth, merciless until Will squirmed with long, quiet keens. The air in their little pocket of the universe grew unbearable and soaking, so he flung the blanket down and shuddered violently at the minute drop in temperature. He grabbed for another pillow and crushed it over his face to avoid the embarrassment of their moment escaping these four walls.

“More,” he managed. “I need… I…”

Hannibal pulled away and smiled against Will’s thigh, giddy and breathless as he kissed back up the inside of the strong legs that clutched him. He nudged the pillow aside to reveal Will’s bewildered face, then pressed a fingertip to his open lips and smiled.

“It’s alright. Remember what we agreed on. There is no need to rush.”

“Hannibal…” Will whined, having deprived himself of saying the name for so long that he now needed his fill of it. He was possessive of how the syllables rolled off his tongue and fit

there so naturally.

“I have such plans for us.” Hannibal sighed and caressed Will’s cheekbone. “What are a few more days of patience compared to what we’ve overcome? You’ve barely endured a thing tonight.”

“You just like to torment me.”

Hannibal hummed absently, as he always seemed to when pleasantly occupied, and his fingertips trailed over Will’s eyebrows and hair, lips and jawline. He blinked like a cat and seemed to be waiting for something.

Will realized, then gasped, “Hannibal, please let me come.”

His monster grinned, slow and wicked, then licked a hot stripe up the column of Will’s throat and purred, “I love how you moan for me.”

He slunk back down, pulling one of Will’s limp legs around his back and sucking his cock like he’d starve if he didn’t. Each trick of his mouth came hard, fast, and thorough until they both saw stars. Will arched into it and shattered with an inhuman sound, grappling for the pillow to smother his long gasps and cries. Only when Will’s head lolled back and Hannibal’s throat must have been raw did he stop and pull away. The obscene string of saliva that still connected him to bruised red lips made Will dizzy all over again.

When Hannibal climbed up to nuzzle his shoulder, asking politely without words, Will smiled and grabbed to pull him over the edge. He stroked Hannibal’s waist with his free hand as he shuddered and gasped, soon flipping him to lie on his back while Will straddled him and bent to lick up the mess. Will shocked himself with the gleeful recklessness that overtook him, indulging whims and cravings in a way he never had. Hannibal’s wrecked, shaky noises drew answering ones from Will, who collapsed and shut his eyes while they breathed out of sync.

They laid there for a while, and to Will’s shock and delight, it was Hannibal who eventually whimpered, “ *Fuck*... ”

Will laughed and kissed him with an excess of tongue. They were both gasping and covered in sweat, the fevered imprints of eager mouths left cool and sticky. Any other time, Will might have found that gross, but not here. He was cleaner than before, even purified. The marks of desperate nails on Will’s back ached pleasantly, and he could *feel* his skin straining not to tear. Hannibal shuffled the blanket down the rest of the way and tossed it off to the side, and Will sprawled his limbs out to stretch. Smiling with fondness that bordered on open awe, Hannibal picked him up and carried him to the ensuite for a shower. Will made a half-hearted protest before curling himself around him.

Hannibal tenderly checked on his hand wounds from earlier before guiding him into the shower. Under the stream of cool water and familiar soap, Will massaged and admired the other’s body until Hannibal was equally drowsy. By the time they fell asleep back in Hannibal’s bed, they would have been content to die where they lay.

. . .

Will woke at seven a.m. to upbeat music drifting from downstairs. It wasn't to Hannibal's taste, so it must have been Mischa up and doing whatever she did. Will did not particularly care.

Cradled in bedding that gods would approve of, he found himself alone, missing the scents of sweat and hair conditioner. A strained sound jumped from his throat when he stretched, but calm washed through his bones as his lungs filled deeply and he yawned. He hadn't slept so well in years. Sinking back into his pillow like a starfish, he tipped his head back and moaned softly to himself, finally free to revel in the addictive vibration of sound. It struck him how quickly he'd begun to refer to this as *his* pillow rather than Hannibal's.

Eventually, Will got up, threw on pajama pants and a robe, and brushed his teeth. A new song came on, muffled by distance.

"Things that you do, and you know I'm crazy 'bout you…

Kisses of fire, burning, burning

I'm at the point of no returning…"

When he wandered downstairs, he did find Mischa in the kitchen, but Hannibal was helping her make cheese and veggie omelettes with fruit plates. Shockingly, he seemed to be letting her have the lead, as she was the one twirling around cabinets and retrieving ingredients. A golden sunrise streamed in through floor-to-ceiling windows, reflecting off the snow as it sparkled with subtle hints of colour. The music was loose, moderately paced, and fun, peeled out of a scrapbook from the seventies.

Hannibal and Mischa danced alone and together as they worked, sharing space like they had choreographed it, but the easy improvisation could not be mistaken. Mischa spun from the stove to grab a salt shaker, but first she took Hannibal's hands and pistoned their arms back and forth, both swishing their hips and laughing with the bubbly joy of children. She leaned back as he leaned in and vice versa, then they spun apart to do their separate tasks and kept dancing in place.

Will was leaning on a door frame to watch the scene, his face beginning to hurt with how widely he smiled. Something colourful and bright burst in his chest. Hannibal turned crisp green apples into geometric slices of just the right thickness, then arranged them on a plate in symmetrical swirls. Will had never seen the man have such pure *fun.* He was so often zipped up into societal composure, but here he was like the carefree boy that he never got to be.

He didn't startle when Will sauntered up to snuggle in his arms, then nuzzled his chest and breathed him in through a soft red sweater. Hannibal smiled even wider and kissed his messy curls, then his pleasure-pink ear lobe, nose, jaw…

Will sighed, grinned, and whispered, "Morning, baby."

Hannibal chuckled at the pet name. “Good morning, Will.”

Mischa made an obnoxious fake gagging sound, and Will shot her a death glare that only made her snicker. She caught his eye over her shoulder and nodded vaguely in greeting before turning away, tossing flakes of something green into the sizzling pan. Will hadn’t noticed before, but Mischa’s knee-length nightgown revealed her two prosthetic legs.

Will’s relaxed demeanor did not change upon making this observation, but Hannibal tensed so slightly that no one else would have noticed. He extracted himself from Will’s grip and turned back to cutting, the knife soothing him as aloe vera would cool a burn. Mischa turned to face them again and plated the first omelette.

Hannibal cleared his throat. “I will wake the girls for breakfast.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “They’re teenagers. Let them sleep in.”

When the food was ready, Hannibal set the round kitchen table beautifully. It looked like an indoor garden of rich colours and fresh-cooked steam. They sat in companionable silence, watching the sky blush from grey to golden to baby blue. The snow continued to sparkle without any indication of the havoc it wreaked last night.

Eventually, Mischa got up and briefly touched her nose to Hannibal’s, then vanished upstairs. For a few minutes, Hannibal just stared out the window and sipped the last of his orange juice until Will crawled into the roomy chair with him and onto his lap, hugging his shoulders. Hannibal hugged him back and played with Will’s hair.

Will grinned. “I didn’t know you liked to dance.”

“There is very little I have not at least dabbled in. A wide skill set opens opportunities.”

“So, you’ve always just had unlimited free time?”

Hannibal licked his lips. “Never unlimited. By nature all time is limited, so we must do what we can. You would be thrilled by what you can find when you nudge aside certain social conventions.”

Will nuzzled his throat again. “I’m starting to see that.”

“Nothing could make me happier, Will.” Hannibal kissed him lazily. “The best opportunities must be pursued and indulged. There is little that you truly *cannot* do.”

“Hm, well, as soon as everyone is born into disgusting amounts of money, we’ll be all set.”

“Are you resentful of my upbringing, Will? I assure you, you should not be.”

“No, but I’m sure privilege accounts for at least some of your massive ego,” Will chuckled, smoothing a hand up and down Hannibal’s chest.

Hannibal sighed, “We came from different places, yet here we are, together.”

Will closed his eyes. “In all seriousness, I’m… resentful of whatever happened to you.”

“Nothing happened to me. I happened. Do not pity Mischa or myself.”

“I’m not, but… Hannibal, it’s okay if you don’t want to say anything now. I don’t want you to spend your visit with her rehashing trauma. I get it. I… just hope that you’ll open up to me eventually, if I can help at all.”

Hannibal kissed him, soft and slow. “Thank you, *mylimasis* .”

Will hummed. “What’s that mean?”

“It’s Lithuanian for something like ‘darling’ or ‘dearest.’ ‘Beloved.’”

“Beloved…” Will sounded small to his own ears. Heat pricked his eyes. Hannibal buried his face in Will’s hair and breathed.

A few moments passed like that, before Will said, “There’s a lot I didn’t get to do as a kid. My dad and I moved around a lot. Didn't have much. Had to spend most of our time working to stay afloat. I’d always just empathize with people who had lots of fun and let that be enough; that was my way of getting diverse experiences.”

“Nourishing your mind. Surely you know that many pleasures in life come for free, or at least not at a financial cost. I feel I gain something from you every moment that is far more precious.”

Will blushed before Hannibal continued. “You saw me dance so gracelessly. I assure you I’m more skilled in a formal setting. Do you have any hidden talents of your own?”

“Uh, my nana used to ask me to sing for her. Said I sounded nice.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, intrigued. “You were close with your grandmother?”

“Well, she didn’t *see* me, just like no one else ever did, but she thought I was a sweet boy and she made me feel… special. Appreciated just for sitting and reading to her. My dad did his best, but he didn’t know how to really care for me. Emotionally, I mean. I didn’t see Nana much, but she knitted me socks and I knew she loved me. She watched these crime documentaries, and that’s what first got me thinking about law enforcement. Those times with her were my… free moments, I guess.”

Hannibal nodded. “She sounds lovely. I owe her a debt for sending you on the path to me.” He paused to play with Will’s hair again, feigning innocence. “I’d like to hear you sing.”

Will groaned. “You won’t let me get away unless I do, will you?”

“I believe I’ve made it clear, Will: I wish to savour every delicacy from your lips.”

He wanted to kiss Hannibal’s vampire grin to distract him, but Will just sighed and dug dusty lyrics from his memory. It was a spooky folk song that he learned in elementary school, and he’d often sung it to his nana to hear her witchy cackle. He hummed the same four sharp,

haunted notes at the end of each line, feeling silly, but Hannibal watched him as if it were an opera.

"There was an old woman all skin and bone…

She lived down by the old graveyard…

One day she decided to take a walk…

She went down by the old graveyard…

She saw the bones a' laying around…

She went to the cupboard to get a broom…

She opened the door and… BOO!"

Of course, the plot twist did not startle Hannibal. When he said nothing, Will cleared his throat and shrugged, blushing even more and grumbling nonsense about the whole thing being childish.

He explained, "Nana was sick for a while. It was just her sense of humour to find a song like that charming. She said she could relate to it."

Hannibal tucked a curl behind Will's ear and finally spoke. "As can I. The woman set out on a regular day and came across something unexpected."

Will grinned. "I guess we should never underestimate the unexpected."

In a second, Hannibal had them standing and tangled together, Will pressed languidly back into the wall.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> CW: Brief, non-graphic mentions of a past emergency c-section and references to infant death

Abigail blinked sticky eyes open to a crack of midmorning light between the curtains, and her body felt like an immobile lump. All she wanted was to stay in bed and burrow into a cave of thick blankets, but once she thought about it, she couldn't get comfortable again.

"Abigail?"

The voice wasn't Hannibal or Will. She snapped up with a flail of limbs, looking around the room through visions of blood and bones cracking… It took a moment to remember the events of the last evening.

"Uh… Emmaline?" she croaked, rubbing the heel of her hand into each eye.

Her cousin stood by the cracked open bedroom door, fiddling with her fingers. They appeared to have been manicured and then worn down by teeth. She wore pale purple flannel pajamas that matched the shadows under her eyes, and her hair was in a loose braid mussed from tossing and turning.

"Morning. Sorry."

"Um…" Abigail sat up straighter. "Did you want to talk?"

Emmaline took a step closer, a hint of desperation showing through in her hand wringing. She looked much younger than her years. "You're the only person who might understand," she whispered. "When my mom told me about you and how you got here, I… hoped that you and I could be on the same page. You have quite the story."

Abigail sighed, smiling a little in understanding. "I was curious to meet you, but last night didn't go very well. Want to sit down?"

Emmaline nodded gratefully and made herself comfortable, cross-legged with perfect posture at the foot of Abigail's bed. They studied each other for a moment, eyes clear and curious like two fish, and Abigail pulled her knees up into a ball. Faint music came from downstairs, detracting from the silence. Now that the girls were alone, they seemed to have the camaraderie of two people atop a tower with no way down. They were looking upon the world with a breeze in their hair, no railings and trusting each other not to push.

Emmaline said, "So, are we?"

“On the same page? What’s the situation between you and Hannibal?”

Emmaline looked away at that. “He’s my uncle who I see like twice a year.” She shrugged. “He’s always been very courteous. Distant, though. He doesn’t love me, not like he loves my mum. Do you think he loves you?”

Abigail huffed a laugh. “Hannibal saved my life and then cut my ear off, so… whatever that is.”

Emmaline’s eyes widened. “He… cut your ear…”

Abigail tentatively brushed her hair aside, and Emmaline studied the puckered tissue with a bout of nervous laughter.

“Holy shit. Why? I just know what happened with Garret Hobbs. I know I said I read about you, but there isn’t a *lot* online.”

Abigail filled her in on the details, while Emmaline nibbled her nails and barely blinked.

“I guess I don’t have many complaints,” Abigail finished. “He and Will treat me well. I don’t know if I have the *right* to complain. When I was pretending to be dead, I stayed at his house by a cliff with nothing for miles. He wasn’t there most of the time, and there was nothing stopping me from running away, calling for help… but I didn’t. I chose to stay, now I’m here. I don’t know what that says about me.”

Emmaline picked at a loose thread on the blanket beside her, studying it intently.

She said, “Hannibal is… persuasive. He constructed an image of what you needed to see. You needed a father figure, and he needed a lure. I think your decision means that you just wanted to feel cared for. I know what that’s like. My mom seems to think I’m more like a cat to keep an eye on than a human being. After years of that, it’s pretty much what I’ve become.”

“Really? That wasn’t the impression I got of her at all.”

Emmaline smirked rather sardonically. “She’s a Lecter, what’d you expect?”

Abigail raised an eyebrow back. “What should I expect from *you* ?”

They studied each other for a moment, and Abigail felt a twinge of teenage recklessness emerge from where it sat on a backburner in her mind.

Emmaline stood up, graceful and quick with a perky smile. “You’ll have to find out.”

She began to wander the room, studying the minimal grey walls like a museum. The exterior-facing wall was warm red brick and had an embedded unlit fireplace. So far only a wardrobe, some dystopian novels that Hannibal called “woefully bleak,” a laptop, and silver and white bedclothes embellished the space. There was an unframed print of *Starry Night* beside the window, which Abigail had bought to spite Will after some arbitrary disagreement. The irony seemed appropriate.

Emmaline grinned. “You’re a fan of Van Gogh?”

“It’s a pretty common painting to have around,” Abigail shrugged, still not getting out of bed. Clearly, Emmaline was not as timid as dinner made her seem, but whether it had been an act or simply circumstance, Abigail couldn’t say.

Emmaline continued, “Seems desperately random to have his work, of all the art available, in your room with not much else. He painted it in an asylum after a dispute with his dear friend, Gauguin. Most people think Van Gogh severed his own ear in despair over Gaugin’s rejection.”

There was no malice to the words, just amusement.

Abigail said, “Most people?”

“Some think that Gauguin cut it off in their fight. We’ll never know.”

“So… you like art, then?”

“I want to teach it, but I like sculptures, mostly.”

Abigail nodded, chewing the inside of her cheek. “That’s nice.”

Emmaline resumed her wandering, snooping in the empty closet before changing the subject on a whim. She looked at Abigail over her shoulder, closing the closet door. “Have you ever killed anyone?”

Abigail grimaced. “I plead the fifth.”

Emmaline’s smirk was vaguely sympathetic this time. “We’re in Canada. There is no equivalent to America’s fifth amendment.”

“Why do you know that?”

“I knew you’d try to pull it.”

Abigail shifted to sit cross-legged. “So, does any of this *bother* you? You froze up when Hannibal touched your shoulder. Have you always known what he is?”

Emmaline sighed and folded back into her perch on the bed. “I found out when everyone else did, but I’m honestly not surprised. It got out to the media when the FBI found actual evidence. Let’s face it, the Chesapeake Ripper is a household name. Not even just in America. Most people don’t avidly follow the case, but when it’s relevant, they know about him and some vague, warped stories. Finding out who he was… people got a thrill. My classmates started talking about it, and I heard from them.”

Abigail leaned forward. “They made the connection and assumed you were like him.”

“Yes!” Emmaline huffed. “It was awful. They called me *la fille de Dracula* , but I guess that would be you, wouldn’t it? I came home to find Mum pacing around, making phone call after

phone call and never getting an answer. I asked her what the hell was happening, and she told me everything."

"Clearly you're angry."

Emmaline rolled her eyes. "Clearly."

"Why don't you go to the police? Why did you come here?"

"I… can't turn him in. It would destroy Mum."

"You're looking out for her feelings even though she's been lying to you?"

"Yes, I am. She's my mother," Emmaline retorted, and her jaw clenched. "Why didn't you turn Garret Hobbs in?"

Abigail swallowed. "He would've killed me. He tried to kill me when Hannibal warned him he was about to be caught."

"But that's not all, is it?" There was something deep and probing in Emmaline's eyes now. She looked like a robot with shiny, lifelike features.

Abigail's throat grew drier and drier. "I didn't know what I would do if my life got flipped upside down like that. I didn't know how I would move on. I still don't know what I would have done if Hannibal and Will hadn't taken me in, but I hate the idea of relying on them."

"Abigail, we're the same."

"You said Hannibal is persuasive?" Abigail muttered. "He's like this… magnetic force. Being around him, seeing just enough of his good qualities… There's really no other option but to be devoted to him. It's creepy, but I can't bring myself to… look away."

The air between the girls hung heavy with whispers, finally free from the blustery and pitch-black halls of their minds that they haunted. It also felt like a betrayal. Illicit. Libellous.

Emmaline looked away, tracing circles on the comforter again. "I… also kind of owe him my life," she said.

"What happened?"

"I almost died before I was born," Emmaline mused. "Mum tripped down some stairs while she was pregnant with me, like right towards the end. Hannibal basically gave her a ton of drugs and cut me out. In their house. I mean, he called an ambulance right after, but I guess it was all really fast."

Abigail blinked. Now it was her turn to say, "Holy shit."

She tried to imagine Hannibal as a young man, barely through medical school, covered in his sister's blood and holding a tiny, squalling Emmaline. Perhaps he had looked at her the way one looks at a bird or a squirrel.

Emmaline just nodded, sardonic again. If she'd had alcohol, she would have sipped it. "So, I've known that story about my heroic doctor uncle for a while, but now I find out he's the fucking Chesapeake Ripper." She stared off into space for a moment, then continued. "The way Hannibal treats me… the way he's always treated me… he ignores that I exist until he sees me. He only talks to me when it's polite or Mum's right there. I didn't know what it was, but there's always been something in his eyes… like he wants to get rid of me. I understand now. He didn't save me to save me; he just did it because saving Mum meant getting me out of the way." Her lip trembled. "I'm an *inconvenience* to him."

Abigail reached and put a hand on Emmaline's knee, then whispered, "Am I the first person you've talked to about this?"

Emmaline nodded. The repressed and stewing words escaped in a rush. "If… anything happened to Mum, he wouldn't have any reason to keep me alive anymore. He could've killed me back then… but he didn't. I don't think he could devastate her that way. It… it would have been so easy."

This image came entirely too easily: a tiny bundle of barely living flesh, its life silently sinking away, Hannibal barely needing to think about it as he held his palm over its nose and mouth. He could have just said Emmaline didn't make it.

She mumbled, " Does the fact that he still has a shred of compassion make it all better or worse?"

Abigail looked down at her own folded hands, then cleared her throat and blinked rapidly. "I understand how you feel. I really do, and I'm sorry." She looked up over Emmaline's shoulder and said, "Hi."

Emmaline whirled around so fast that she nearly fell off the bed, then her shoulders sagged. Will stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame with curious eyes behind glasses. He said nothing.

Emmaline looked from him to Abigail, brow furrowing in cracked betrayal. "How long has he been listening? Abigail! You knew he was listening."

Abigail didn't want to meet her eyes, but she did. "Long enough."

"You… I wanted to trust you."

"I want to trust you too, but I won't keep secrets." She straightened her shoulders. "I think it's only fair if we're all on an even playing field. Anything that could influence your decisions here should be open on the table. You understand."

Will and Abigail both knew who would be five steps ahead, but Emmaline didn't have to.

He simply said, "There's breakfast downstairs if you want any," and wandered away.

Emmaline stood up with what dignity she could muster, glared at Abigail, and whirled towards the door, but she stopped in front of it as if at an unexpected cliff. It took a moment

of pacing, shuffling, and tapping before she could storm out without looking back. Her anguish was palpable, but Abigail neatly folded the guilt away. It had been therapeutic to relate to someone, but precaution outweighed it. Emmaline was a loose cannon, and Abigail would protect her family.

. . .

Will ventured back down the stairs, still feeling calm and weak-limbed from the night. Vaguely mulling over what he'd heard, he was proud of Abigail's manipulations: getting Emmaline to open up to assess the potential threat. Of course, he already had an impression of Emmaline and Mischa's intentions, but the details of their origin tidily filled in any remaining gaps. The youngest Lecter was hardly a risk to their safety, but the ghost tendrils of her fear still quivered on the underside of his skin like imprints of bright light on closed eyelids. Emmaline radiated coiled energy with nowhere to free it, and that made her reckless.

Mischa… compartmentalized. She tolerated aspects of Hannibal rather than loving them. Will could tell by the pinched quality of her smile whenever the subject came up. Navy blue ink spilled into the expanse of particles that composed her, not quite black but dark enough. In the brief time Will had witnessed, there had been subconscious effort to the way Mischa moved, not physically visible but emanating from the light air she tried to present. Someone without Will's empathy would not be able to tell that she did not trust the world.

Will went to the den, where Hannibal sat at the grand piano. He wore a pearly cream waistcoat and pants with a white shirt and no tie. A tall, panelled window framed him with luxurious white curtains drawn open, and the sky outside was pale blue, golden light sparkling off the snow. Hannibal patted the bench beside him without looking up, and Will sat down with a fond expression. Hannibal's hands went back to dancing over a rich, heavy tune, coaxing it from the keys.

Will said, "I thought you'd want a harpsichord or something equally esoteric."

Hannibal allowed one of those tiny smiles. "Perhaps in our next home."

"You didn't decorate your room, and you haven't indulged in things you usually do. It's like you don't want to settle in here, but then why did you agree to stay?"

The music slowed but didn't simplify. It enthralled Will to see Hannibal's mind in action, even so subtly; he could carry a conversation on any topic while doing exquisite things with little effort. His lips pressed together and he looked more insistently at the keys, but through it all he wore a calm expression.

Will sighed, "Hannibal, you can tell me. It's hard to understand if you actively work to keep me out."

"That is the point, Will."

"I thought we shared something special last night. Did you change your mind about us? Or do you just want to be prepared for a quick escape if we need it?"

Hannibal stopped playing and cradled Will's neck, stroking his thumbs over the pulse points. He whispered, "I have not changed my mind. I want to share the world with you."

Will admitted, "I want to be wherever you are. That's it."

Hannibal looked at Will's lips, avoiding eye contact. "I own this house, and we can do anything we like with it. As I said, if you wish it to be our home, then it is so."

"You still didn't explain why you haven't gone all out with your decorating. Or was that style just part of your person suit?"

Hannibal's smile this time was wistful. He let his defences down with a sigh, turning back to the piano and silently brushing over the keys. This was so precious a chance, and Will savoured it. They had said a lot in a haze of arousal before dinner, but now it would be wise to make everything clear with sharp minds.

"Or…" Will eventually murmured, "You've been staying close to where we came from so I can still leave if I want to. You didn't want me to feel overwhelmed overseas where you're at home and I'm unfamiliar. This place is… neutral territory. That's unexpected of you, Doctor Lecter. I thought you'd snatch me away and never let go. Last night sure felt like that."

Hannibal sighed. "I admit, I underestimated my fear of losing you. The depth of it." He looked up. "I enjoyed the chase, Will. I enjoyed how you fought me at every turn, each act bringing you closer to yourself. When I smelled the lies on you and learned of your manipulations, I felt betrayed, but I was proud. Your skills rival mine, but I was never going to let you lead Jack to my door. I dreaded what had to happen should you not accept my last offer of a choice, and when you did, I realized that the choice was what you needed."

Will huffed, "You knew that in the barn, rambling about whispering into chrysalises. You said what emerged was beyond you."

"My whispering caused you to remain enclosed by your fighting. It wearied you and made you resent me."

Will nudged him with a shoulder. "Glad you finally see. It should have been common sense that drugging someone and framing them for murder are not acceptable flirtation techniques." He thought for a moment, recalling the conversation he had recently overheard from Abigail's room. He said, "While we're on the subject, we barely talked about what you did to Margot."

Hannibal glanced at him. "Mason Verger made his own choices. You tried to have him kill me for my hand in the matter, yet you saved me. Was that not a resolution?"

"I wasn't about to let that repulsive pig kill you," Will jeered. "He didn't deserve it. I was clinging to scraps of normalcy, even when I was exploring our darkness."

"You wanted to fight the destruction by nurturing a life, and my actions took away that chance. You did not seem devastated by the loss, Will."

“You attacked my independence. That’s what pissed me off. I was scared because I couldn’t stay mad at you, ashamed because I felt no grief… so I lashed out, but the threat of losing you was the tipping point. I realized then that I wanted to run away with you. Seeing you break Mason’s neck…” Will bit his tongue to centre himself, and remembered the surge of need he had felt. A wave had crashed, receding calmly into the bloody depths of Hannibal’s self-satisfied eyes. “Yeah, that was when I knew.”

Hannibal sighed again in near reverie. “I cannot say, in retrospect, that I wish I had known that. It would have spared us both devastating uncertainty, but the threat of losing you to your own betrayal made me come to terms with how much I only wanted you to…”

He pursed his lips, considering.

Will’s breath hitched. “To what, Hannibal?”

Hannibal took a breath of his own. “I have always wanted you to accept yourself, but I underestimated how much I wanted you to love me.”

Will turned Hannibal back to face him and said, “I told you, we’re family. Wasn’t everything I said and did last night enough to show it?”

“It was, and then some. Anything you deem honest is enough, Will, as long as you are happy. I simply wanted to ensure there was nothing left unsaid.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Will stroking Hannibal’s knuckles and graceful fingers before pulling them up for a kiss. Then, he guided him to stand and move over to the couch. “Hannibal…”

It was like the night had been a dream, and their deepest insecurities had dragged them back to before the last dinner in Baltimore. It was unlike Hannibal to tiptoe around Will, or anyone, for that matter.

Will was suddenly desperate to break the tense spell. He sank to his knees and pressed his cheek to Hannibal’s thigh, looking up into his eyes. The sudden, unravelled look of awe he found there sent fresh waves crashing in droves, and Will tipped his head to kiss up Hannibal’s inner leg through the fine, cool fabric.

“This is real,” he murmured, reminding them both in equal measure.

Hannibal drew a long, unfairly calm breath. “Will.”

Will’s open mouth found where it sought, still on the wrong side of the fabric and only suggesting, but he gasped against the obscene tent of Hannibal’s pants. This time, Hannibal shut his eyes and licked his lips with a quiet groan, legs falling wide apart as he made himself breathe.

Will nuzzled closer and murmured, “Did you have any plans for today?”

“N-not particularly… Our guests have jet lag and such…”

“Hm, never seen you at a loss for words,” Will grinned. “I’m touched.”

“Lock the door. Please.”

He was up and across the room in a flash, then back to where he began.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ll take good care of you. You just have to be quiet.”

“God, Will…”

Will chuckled. “ *No* , baby. *Sshh*… ”

The breathy susurrations of his voice smoothed over blood-hot skin as Will unzipped his fly and pulled his cock free, making Hannibal whimper and writhe while Will grinned in satisfaction. Will’s eyes fell half shut, gasping until he bent down and filled his mouth with what he wanted so badly. His tongue went for experimental sweeps of its own accord, and Will’s eyelids grew heavy with sweet satisfaction. Hannibal arched his back and relaxed against the sofa, desperately gripping Will’s curls and purring his admiration.

Hannibal couldn’t help himself. “Oh, *yes* … perfect. Will, you’re *perfect* .”

Will smirked and buried himself in his task, moaning whenever he could because he was addicted to it buzzing down his sternum. His arms came up to tightly circle Hannibal’s hips, and he let his own neck fall limp to get closer and settle in. They’d be here a while.

. . .

Abigail didn’t see Emmaline or Mischa for the rest of the morning, which was likely for the best. She didn’t know if this would be a busy, activity-of-the-day type of family visit, or if they would all just exist in the same space because their guests wanted to get out of Paris. Hannibal still had to lie low, after all; he couldn’t go waltzing about the town for fun. He surely wanted to and saw little risk, but Will had pleaded with him to wait until things died down.

She got dressed in jeans, a red turtleneck, and a white scarf, then skipped down the stairs with inexplicable nervous energy, having decided to work on Hannibal’s birthday present until lunch. It was short notice, but she was confident in her ability to get it done; he had been teaching her to play piano, and she hoped to impress him by finally mastering Chopin’s “Raindrop Prelude (Op. 28 No. 15).” When she got to the den, however, she just stopped and rolled her eyes.

Hannibal and Will cuddled together on the sofa by a window, murmuring with their hair and clothes askew. Hannibal tucked a strand of Will’s hair behind his ear, one arm around the other’s relaxed shoulders, and Abigail fought a silly, affectionate grin. She’d made that bet with Freddie without taking it seriously, but after three months of listening to Hannibal’s whining, it had become clear that the journalist was right. It was about time those two got over themselves, but Abigail thanked the gods that she hadn’t walked in sooner.

“Hey,” she said.

Hannibal looked up with a grin, absently petting through Will's hair. "Hello, Abigail. I hear you had an insightful morning."

Will blushed. "Uh, hey, Abigail."

She glanced at the piano. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Hannibal assured. "We'd love to hear you play."

"I was hoping you could go. It's a surprise."

He raised a brow, grin widening. "Oh?"

"Yep." She sat down at the bench and started stretching her hands. It didn't seem like they were going anywhere, so she just practiced some chords and simple tunes to warm up. She looked over her shoulder to where they still watched her curiously, and she asked, "Did you actually want to kill Emmaline?"

"I considered it," Hannibal replied. "But murdering children is among the lowest of deeds and beneath me. Mischa would have found out eventually, and it would have torn us apart."

They sat listening to the piano for a moment, until Abigail struck a few resounding notes, calm as could be. "You killed Emmaline's father."

Hannibal did not ask how she surmised this. "He did not deserve Mischa."

Abigail nodded. There was little else that could possibly have happened. If anyone was going to take a protective older brother role to the extreme, it would be Hannibal. Garret Jacob Hobbs used to joke about killing any boy who even looked at Abigail, and though that was somewhat typical dad humour, the context spoke for itself.

She sighed. "Would you two kill anyone I tried to date?"

Will said, "Just anyone who hurt you."

Hannibal hummed. "The idea of killing them all is appealing, but we cannot on good conscience hold you back from experiencing all that life has to offer. I meant what I said about giving you all you once lacked. You are entirely capable of assessing a person, as you've shown with Emmaline."

It dawned on Abigail, then. "Did you ask Will to eavesdrop on us? You were testing my loyalty."

Will shrugged. "We heard her pacing outside your room for half the night. She clearly wanted to talk to you. Figures she'd be scared here and try to test you in return, find an ally."

Hannibal asked, "Do you feel you've harmed your chances of befriending Emmaline?"

"Probably," Abigail said. "It doesn't really matter. It's only three weeks."

“But you so badly wanted a companion.”

She worried at her lip. “I’ll see if I can fix things with her. We shouldn’t antagonize her, or she could act out and put us at risk.”

Hannibal nodded absently and vaguely glanced aside. “Hello, Mischa.”

Abigail and Will turned in their seats to find her just walking in, absently braiding her hair over one shoulder. She wore jeans and a nice floral sweater with thick socks. Will pointedly settled back against Hannibal’s side, and Hannibal looked like the king of the world with crossed knees and an arm over the sofa’s back.

“ *Salut* ,” Mischa replied. “I’m going shopping today. Your selection of snack foods is abysmal.”

Abigail tipped her chin up and laughed. “I second that.”

Hannibal pouted, looking betrayed. “If you’d like me to prepare something, you need only ask. The hardened corn syrup and potato paste you are seeking cannot be classified as food.”

Mischa came up and punched him on the shoulder. “Neither can people. Are you joining me, or are you busy?”

She glanced at Will, who turned pink.

Hannibal did not flinch at the tease or the physical assault, instead looking to Abigail. “Why don’t you go with Mischa and Emmaline?” he suggested. “You can show them around town and get some fresh air. I know you’re growing bored of our accommodations.”

Mischa nodded with a friendly smile, but it didn’t look entirely natural. “You’re welcome to join. I’d like to get to know you better.”

Abigail gnawed on the inside of her cheek. If she went, then she would have to sit in the car with Emmaline’s visceral resentment, but if she didn’t they would continue to tiptoe around one another. Abigail convulsed at the idea of feeling unwelcome in her own home again. She might as well try to break the ice.

She offered Mischa a closed-lipped smile in return. “Okay, sure.”

Mischa clapped her hands together once in delight. “Excellent. I will get Emmaline. Hannibal, is there anything you’d like us to bring back?”

“Only yourselves, my dear,” he fondly replied, and Mischa just rolled her eyes at him before flouncing from the room.

Hannibal glanced at Abigail while Will squirmed awkwardly. They were *obviously* trying to get rid of her so they could have sex, so she seconded that eye roll and bade them goodbye. She bundled into winter clothes, then sat on the front step to wait for the others. The fresh air did wonders for the sluggish feeling she’d had in her knees and skull all morning, and she simply sat thinking about nothing until the door opened.

Mischa said, “Emmaline, please don’t dawdle. It’s cold, and Abigail has been waiting long enough.”

Abigail stood up and smiled again, closed-lipped. “It’s fine,” she assured. “You okay, Emmaline?”

Emmaline was pacing in the same way she did before using any doorway, tapping her feet and flicking her wrists in sequences until she seemed settled enough to walk through.

“Yeah,” she muttered

Abigail glanced at Mischa, who just watched her daughter with an itchy sort of concern. Mischa opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. There didn’t seem to be a lot of sympathy there, just confusion and… disappointment? Emmaline’s comment about Mischa’s aloofness was beginning to make sense.

They all buckled into Mischa’s blue rental car, and she offered Abigail the front seat. Emmaline didn’t seem to care, simply leaning her head on the window with a blank and sulky stare. They drove for a moment down a plowed, damp road with snow piled up on its sides.

Mischa broke the uncomfortable silence, seemingly unaware of it in the first place. “So, what’s the climate between you two?”

Abigail wrung her fingers together, glancing at Emmaline. The other girl did not seem inclined to answer, so Abigail approached with caution.

“We’ve… spoken, and I might not have gone about it with the most respect for her.”

“So, you don’t feel you can trust Abigail, Emmaline?”

“I think that’s fair,” Emmaline huffed. “I can’t trust anyone, apparently.”

Mischa looked at her squarely through the rearview mirror. It was the first fully-focused attention Abigail had seen Mischa give her daughter. “Hannibal isn’t going to hurt you, honey. He promised me.”

Emmaline rolled her eyes and recited, “And he always keeps his promises. Bitch broke the *Hippocratic oath,* if I recall. And Will hasn’t promised us anything. He freaks me out.”

Smart girl, Abigail mused to herself, smothering a snicker.

Emmaline continued, “You can tell him that too, Abigail. I don’t care.”

Abigail let her mouth quirk up a little. “Good, because he won’t care either.”

A moment passed in stewing silence, then Mischa tried again.

“So tell us about Will, Abigail.”

“Hasn’t Hannibal told you plenty?”

“He’s biased.”

“So am I.”

Mischa gave a tiny grin of her own without looking away from the road. “I’d like your perspective.”

Abigail tried not to fidget. “Do you have trouble reading Will? He does that on purpose. If he won’t open up to you, it’s because he’s jealous of you. Hannibal and Will are possessive of each other.”

Mischa just hummed, but it held laughter. “A pity for Will. If he wants my brother, he’s got to go through me.”

“Do you think Will doesn’t deserve him?” Abigail asked.

“I think Will is entirely deserving of Hannibal. They deserve each other, even if it is for… ehm… the wrong reasons. Hannibal adores him beyond anything I ever expected. Watching them together, I don’t think Will would turn Hannibal in, but the trails of law enforcement and media lurking behind him aren’t something I’m comfortable with.”

Abigail pressed her lips together and nodded, offering an admission in return. “I don’t blame Will for killing my dad. He and Hannibal saved me. They… they love me.”

Emmaline snorted from the back seat. “You don’t sound so sure of that.”

Abigail sighed. There was no point in trying to dissect Hannibal and Will’s emotions. They defied categorization. She certainly felt devoted to them, reverent and grateful, but love? Casually telling Hannibal Lecter that she loved him seemed outlandishly impossible. He and Will definitely loved each other more than her.

She straightened more in her seat. “They’re my fathers now. They’ve done everything and more for me. There are lots of shapes love can take. We’re still figuring out… family.”

Mischa gave her a soft look. “He cares about you, Abigail. As unlikely as he is to admit it, believe me, you wouldn’t be here if he didn’t.”

The statement was objectively screwed up, but it soothed Abigail to her core.

She cleared her throat. “He’s pretty protective of you too. Why do you live on different continents?”

“I went with him to America, eager to leave ghosts behind. I was twelve, Hannibal was eighteen, and he became my legal guardian since our uncle died and our aunt…” she pursed her lips. “Our aunt left us. I thought I’d feel free, but I felt like a ghost attached to him. He went to medical school, he hired private tutors for me through high school, and we just… survived for a few years on our inheritance. All we had aside from that was each other. Emmaline came into the picture when I was twenty, and Hannibal… was not pleased.”

Abigail glanced at her. “He didn’t want to share you.”

“No, he didn’t. After a few years, I didn’t want to put up with his pettiness anymore, so I left. I went back to France, built my life, and Hannibal and I didn’t speak for several years. It’s really best that we get time away from each other.”

“He feels like he can’t live without you,” Abigail said. “Do you think that’s love, or obsession? Possessiveness?”

Mischa shrugged. “Whatever it is, it makes him vulnerable, and that scares him. I think that scares everybody. He’s very human that way. Emmaline?”

Emmaline glanced up in acknowledgement, and Mischa said, “Did you dislike Will hearing what you said because it made you feel more vulnerable in an already tedious setting?”

Emmaline acquiesced. “Yes… and Abigail keeping secrets from Hannibal and Will would make her feel vulnerable around complete strangers when her security hinges on us keeping quiet. I understand where she was coming from.”

Abigail turned a little to look at her. “Thanks,” she said softly.

Mischa seemed to approve. “Could you two please give one another a second chance? We can’t have anyone at each other’s throats in this family.”

Emmaline slouched more, crossing her arms. “Yes.”

Abigail swallowed and nodded in agreement.

Mischa seemed to finally exhale. “Good.”

. . .

The grocery store downtown didn’t have the variety that Hannibal would typically seek, but that’s what he got for running from the law. Whenever Abigail and Will came here with a hyper-specific shopping list, they had to return home and witness that disappointed little pout. They wanted to make him happy, but stocking the basket with packages of cookies and instant noodles made Abigail feel giddy with the little slight against him. She’d never dared to poke and prod at Garret Jacob Hobbs; he was too messy, and unexpected things could fly out of that mess like projectiles.

Emmaline picked out granola bars and normal snack foods for the next three weeks, and Mischa hummed her approval. Abigail and Emmaline went off to replenish bath products refused by airport security. Wandering the quiet aisles alone, they didn’t feel the need to talk much, tiptoeing around each other and sparing glances when they thought the other wasn’t looking. It seemed like forgiveness was nudging between the cousins, but in resentment’s place was awkwardness. Emmaline and Mischa had taken to speaking in seamless Ontarian accents while in public, blending in to attract less notice.

Emmaline seemed distracted, glancing at the shelves, moving her lips, and unfurling her fingers at her sides in some sort of pattern. It took a moment of subtle observation, but Abigail realized that she was counting to herself.

Abigail cleared her throat. “I see what you mean about your mom. She doesn’t seem very understanding of how some things make you feel.”

“You mean the OCD? I embarrass her.”

“And you still want her approval?”

Emmaline stared at the floor as they wandered. “I want her support. She’s my mom. She’s always kept me safe. She’s not like… uh, Alec.”

Abigail nodded, understanding, and Emmaline continued at a nearly indiscernible whisper. “Do you get… I don’t know, compassion and understanding from Alec and Henry?”

Henry Lavelle was Will’s fake name, and its significance did not elude him or Abigail. Hannibal had branded Will with his initials, tying them close, declaring like letters scratched in hearts on cliffsides.

Abigail nodded. “Yeah. Alec’s too smart for his own good. He knows when something’s bothering me and how to help, even if it’s not on an emotional level. Henry can literally feel what I feel, and we’re in a similar situation, so he’s easy to talk to.”

Emmaline sighed. “That’s why he freaks me out. His… empathy, is it? I feel like he’s peeling open my ribcage with it and serving you guys little bites.”

“Yeah. It takes some getting used to,” Abigail mumbled. “It’s not his fault, though.”

They came to the checkout counter and found Mischa waiting. She waved them over, they unloaded things onto the belt, then left and packed everything into the car.

Mischa was worrying at her upper lip, scanning Emmaline for harm that wasn’t there. “You should stay with me next time, okay? No wandering off on your own.”

Emmaline rolled her eyes. “I’m almost eighteen, Mum.”

Mischa whispered, despite them being alone in the car. “Yes, but… Emamline, people could figure us out, try to ransom you… who knows? Make sure you’re both always using your fake names, okay? You can’t even slip up by accident.”

“Okay! You think *Alec* would have let us come out here at all if it was dangerous? Even if he doesn’t care about us, he wouldn’t let us be a liability.”

Mischa looked affronted at that. “Of course he cares about us!”

Emmaline snorted. Abigail sighed. The rest of the drive passed in antsy silence, and as soon as the car stopped, Emmaline dragged Abigail around the side of the house. Mischa called after them, dripping with sarcasm, “Thanks for helping me carry the groceries.”

Emmaline slumped on a back porch against the brick wall. It overlooked the unfenced backyard and frozen lake, and the expanse looked like an endless tundra with clouds obscuring Toronto far away. Abigail imagined that it would look just like the ocean when

summer thawed its hibernation. Everything was eerily silent without water lapping at the shore.

“Did you see how condescending she is?” Emmaline ranted when her mom was out of earshot. “We can walk around a store and live. You’ve had your throat cut, and you’re fine.”

Abigail shuffled awkwardly. “She’s… protective. That seems to run in the family.”

“If she wanted to protect me, she wouldn’t have brought me to a house full of serial killers. She wouldn’t help them and risk being taken away from me.”

“I know fear.”

“Mum’s just overcompensating. You said they help you, but do you *really* feel safe with them?”

It shocked Abigail how quickly she replied. “Yes.”

Emmaline pursed her lips. “Why don’t you live on your own? You could easily have your own place to live. Don’t pretend you don’t know he has money to burn.”

Abigail sighed. “I… don’t know what I would do. I could live on my own, but my life would be empty. I can’t share who I really am or my past with anyone, I haven’t been to college yet, and… Hobbs worked so hard to instill this pervasive *fear* in me that it’s hard to shake. He wanted to scare me into keeping me close. The world is so huge and complex, I don’t know where to start. I should have been going through all this teenage angst years ago and be moving on by now, but I had to grow up quickly to survive. Now I’m catching up on what I missed, and I wish I could just… feel capable.”

Hannibal had once dug up her father’s corpse to demonstrate the power she had to reclaim her life. He’d told her to never be ashamed of who she is. It might have been a shade of manipulation, but it still sank beneath the surface and loitered with waiting passion in her bone marrow.

Much to her surprise, Emmaline was listening with a small smile as her breath puffed in the air. The smile faded, but she said, “I understand that. How am I supposed to be an independent adult when I can’t even handle this OCD fucker tossing things in my head? *Everything* feels scary half the time. Little things are a big deal. I don’t know how I could possibly confront actual problems, so I just… hide behind Mum’s skirt. Metaphorically.”

Abigail glanced at her, as they’d both been looking straight ahead. “That won’t work forever.”

“I know.”

“You’re *strong* for facing every day when little tasks seem huge, Emmaline. You shouldn’t be ashamed of who you are.”

“I’m not ashamed of who I am,” Emmaline sighed. “This isn’t who I am. Sometimes I can’t tell what’s me and what’s the disorder. I’m not technically diagnosed, I guess, but all the

symptoms are there. Have been all my life. And Hannibal refers to it as OCD, so I guess he'd know, right?"

"Why haven't you gotten help?"

Emmaline barked out a semi-hysterical laugh at that. "Mum doesn't trust psychiatrists."

They both broke into snorting giggles.

. . .

Will clung around Hannibal's shoulders, hot water falling in steamy patterns to trickle down their skin. The tile wall was frigid compared to their bodies, but the chill up Will's back served to keep him steady. In the precious hour or so they had been alone, he found himself unable to shut up, moaning himself sore again while Hannibal kissed him in every way a person can be kissed. Two voracious monsters were finally free to *take.*

Hannibal busied himself with further corrupting the throat he was offered, sucking deep bruises and leisurely rolling their cocks together. Will's head fell back in limp pleasure, and his nails scrabbled at the fuzz on Hannibal's solid chest.

Eventually, Hannibal turned his head towards Mischa's muffled voice as she called for him downstairs. He pulled back and kissed Will's temple.

"It seems the ladies have returned."

"Hm." Will opened his groggy eyes and blinked to focus them. "Guess we should go check on Abigail?"

Hannibal grinned. "My sister didn't murder her, Will."

"Maybe not, but Emmaline might have."

"I sincerely doubt she has it in her."

They shut off the water and toweled each other dry, not in any hurry and frequently getting distracted. Once they were dressed neatly, little evidence remained of their pastimes, but Will's bruises stood out and he didn't bother to cover them.

Will leisurely dragged his lips down Hannibal's jaw. "Would you kill anyone who looked at me?"

Hannibal smoothed strong hands over Will's lower back. "They'd suffer much worse."

"Would you want me to do it instead? Let you watch? Hunt down all my exes to prove my devotion?"

"Will…" That sound toed the border of a whine.

“It wouldn’t take very long,” Will pressed. “There’s only a few. Would you have me kill Alana too? Margot? Didn’t you like Margot enough to let her live?”

“I’d allow you anything, Will, though… I would prefer to leave Alana and Margot be.”

Will pulled away and looked seriously into his face. “Glad we agree on that.”

They ventured downstairs to find Mischa huffing about the kitchen. Her hair was matted and mussed from her winter hat, giving her eyes a wilder quality in their pink-skinned frame. She had left half the cupboards open putting groceries away, and Hannibal’s eyes tracked the scene with an amusing blend of affection and distaste.

“*Why*,” she griped, “do you need thirty-four different kinds of spices, Hannibal? The way they source these is probably wildly unethical and exploitative, for starters.”

His lips quirked into a tiny smile. “Thirty-six. Mischa, sit down. Where are the girls?”

She fell onto a barstool and leaned on the counter, hands flailing and gesturing. “Outside. They’re fine. The entire trip was nothing but anxiety. All I could think was what if Abigail is recognized? What if Emmaline decides to run off in a panic? What if someone slips on the ice and cracks their head open, and we have to go to the hospital but can’t explain why we’re in this freezing country in the first place? It was exhausting and I’m never leaving this house again.”

Will wanted to snicker at her theatrics, but he understood that feeling of constant unease. He opened up his empathy and leaned back against the fridge, facing her while Hannibal put things away and glared at each colourful package of processed snacks.

After a moment, Hannibal announced that he was going to check on Abigail. It was a transparent excuse to leave Will and Mischa alone for the first time, but Will let it slide for convenience. Hannibal wanted to see what they would do.

“Hey, uh, Mischa?” Will ventured. She looked up, and he said, “We’re all adjusting to new… circumstances. I feel that way too a lot of the time.”

She met his eyes, probing. “What way?”

He took a breath. “Like you’re a stone dropping through an endless dark pit, small and originating from no particular place. There’s no end and you’re incapable of starving. You’ve gotten so used to falling in pitch blackness that it doesn’t even scare you anymore, and if the air stilled around you for the first time in your life, you’d suffocate.”

Her head tipped and she breathed out a small laugh, steepling fingers beneath her chin. “Alice in Wonderland, down the rabbit hole of flashing lights and florid taste. Ghoulish faces leer in constant subtle shadows.”

“What keeps you tethered to reality?”

“Hannibal.” Mischa blinked. “He designed the rings of Hell, knows them better than Lucifer himself. He’s the only one who can guide us through.”

The shadow lurking in Will peeked around a curtain in his chest, and he asked, “So, why do you stay?”

“Why do you?”

“I think we have different reasons. I chose him, but you were born into his world. You nearly left it when you were little, and he dragged you back in gentle arms. You owe him your life, don’t you?”

She pursed her lips and her breath came thicker. “Has he told you what happened when we were kids?”

“I have a vague idea.”

“You can tell a lot of things.”

“Probably more than you’d like.”

Her eyes narrowed, on guard. “What are you saying?”

“It’s clear that you don’t want me around, but you know what they say about in-laws and outlaws.”

Mischa actually snickered at that. “I do see why he enjoys you.”

Will went on. “Are you worried for his safety, or are you jealous of what he has with me? He has the connection you’ve never been allowed to have. That *he’s* never *let* you have.”

Her face fell, stormy. “You disapprove of how he isolates me, yet you do the same to him, trying to push me away to keep him all to yourself. How ironic since you’ve tried to kill him? I know all about that delinquent you sent to hang him. I sat by Hannibal’s side at the hospital while you were in the prison he shoved you aside to.” She stood up and crossed the room to him, almost conspiratorial. “Losing me would destroy him, Will, and I love him. He’s my brother. That’s why I stay. I protect him because I need him.”

Will raised an eyebrow, intrigued to have gotten such a rise out of her so quickly. He was beginning to piece together exactly where her weak spots were, just in case, but her determination and devotion impressed him.

Mischa continued. “Honestly, Will, I pity you. Your idea of family is so malformed and deprived that your possessiveness and desperation are going to crush you one day. If I tell Hannibal you’re trying to get rid of me, who do you think he’ll choose? I’d be careful if I were you. You know he’d probably gut you if he felt betrayed.”

Will hid the shiver that slithered up through his abdomen. He could *feel* that knife in him, as if in some other world it had already happened.

He said, “Hannibal ‘shoved me aside’ because he was afraid of how he felt for me, and he needed a scapegoat for his own safety. You heard all of his… What was it? ‘Pathetic pining?’

He and I are past that now, and I'm not going anywhere either, Mischa. Losing me would destroy him too."

She sighed, suddenly looking much older and the fight drained out of her. "I know. It's just hard to… nevermind. We should start over." Her face did its best to lift into a jovial smirk.

Will swallowed, scanning for deceit and finding none. She could only play the game for so long, and its toll on her was a dark cloud rolling over the sun. So, he nodded and shimmied his way back into an acceptable bubble of personal space.

"Okay," he agreed.

Mischa brightened instantly and turned on her heel to retrieve a package of cookies.

"Want some?"

Chapter 5

“Speak of the devil,” Emmaline muttered.

“And he shall appear,” agreed Hannibal with a grin, having stepped around the corner to find her and Abigail sitting on the porch. “Aren’t you cold?”

He was bundled up in stylish winter clothes, entirely too many layers for the mild chill in the air.

Abigail smiled back, reigning in her previous fit of giggling. “Uh, we’re just talking.”

“I see that. What joke at my expense am I not privy to?” He didn’t seem offended, just conversational. To Abigail’s shock, he sat on the deck beside Emmaline, folding himself into a smaller form at a polite distance away.

Emmaline visibly grit her teeth, and Abigail suppressed a snicker at his blatant ploy to unsettle the poor girl. Instead, Abigail tipped her chin up and said, “None of your business.”

Hannibal raised a brow and turned to look out at the lake. “Emmaline, did you have a restful night?”

She scoffed. “Nope. Big spooky house full of murderers.”

“You do not adjust well to new environments,” Hannibal supplied. The change in routine makes you feel unsafe surrounded by things out of your control.”

Emmaline was on her feet in a blink, standing square and bold. “Do *not* try that with me, Doctor Lecter. How about we just stay out of each other’s way, yeah?”

Hannibal went on. “You’ve always feared that at any moment, your life could collapse around you for no clear reason, and now that nightmare has come true. You hold me responsible. It seems you need an outlet for your rage and betrayal, Emmaline. I’ve heard you enjoy fencing.”

She inhaled, shifted her jaw, and answered, “Yes…”

“As it happens, so do I. My aunt and I endeavored to learn together when I was a boy. I have the necessary equipment here if you’d fancy a challenge.”

Emmaline grinned haltingly, suspicion and snark in her eyes. “You’ll let me come at you with a weapon?”

“I think we’d both find it enlightening. You are welcome to be angry however you see fit.”

She stopped shifting. “Actually, yeah. Let’s do it.”

Hannibal stood as well, an impossibly graceful action that Abigail stumbled to keep up with. Then, he swept away towards the house, beckoning them to follow.

Inside, they found Mischa and Will sitting on the counter with hot chocolate and factory-made cookies. Hannibal gave them a pained look, but they just grinned back, daring him to make a fuss. Ultimately, he let it slide and tipped his chin up.

“Emmaline and I are going to do a bit of fencing. You are welcome to watch.”

Mischa stiffened as she slid off the counter, eyeing them. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Emmaline began to sulk, but Hannibal just held up a hand, beseeching. “Mischa, dear, I promise no one will be hurt. Surely you know Emmaline is competent.”

“I just… she fights people her own age, at her own level. It’s hardly fair to expect…”

Emmaline said, “I’m fine, Mum. I want to. What’s he going to do, cut my throat?”

Will snorted. Abigail flinched.

Mischa opened her mouth, closed it, then closed her eyes with a sigh. “Fine.”

Emmaline and Hannibal brightened, almost giddy and looking too much alike, and Will hopped to the floor with amusement dancing under his mask of indifference.

Hannibal gestured down the hall. “Come along then, everyone.”

He led his rapt audience down into the finished basement, past the wine cellar and the door Abigail hadn’t dared to pass yet. They ended in a chilly storage space, where Hannibal knelt down to open one of two large chests. He pulled out the white protective gear that Abigail had seen in movies and the Olympics, and Emmaline donned it with an arched brow, holding the mesh-covered helmet under an arm.

“Why do you have stuff that happens to fit me?” she asked.

Hannibal quirked his lips, his version of a shrug. “I’ve been hoping to teach Abigail, but I’m sure she doesn’t mind if you borrow it.”

Sharp exhilaration flung through Abigail as he glanced at her and she blinked back. She wanted Hannibal to teach her how to be quick, cunning, and capable. She wanted swords in their hands and him defeated with a proud smile.

He closed the first chest and reached for a longer one, but Emmaline protested.

“Wait, aren’t you going to wear all this too?”

“I’ll be fine,” he smirked, pulling on only gloves.

Will said, “Hannibal, she has a sword and a temper.”

Hannibal's perpetual grin widened. "So do I, darling."

Emmaline's face flamed red. "Well, then I don't want to wear it either…"

Mischa cut in, comically pale. "No way, missy."

"Mom!"

"Emmaline, for the love of god, *please* ."

Emmaline scowled. "He has an advantage, then! I can't hit his head."

Hannibal nodded in assent. "Then I will not aim for your head either, though I'm sure your mother would prefer that you still wear the helmet."

Mischa nodded, and Emmaline sighed but relented.

Hannibal opened the chest to reveal six neatly aligned swords with slender, flexible blades and three different types of handles. Plastic pieces blunted all their tips. He glanced at Emmaline, dripping with faux innocence.

"Foil, epee, or sabre?"

Emmaline narrowed her eyes. "Sabre."

Hannibal grinned back, slow and amused. "I thought the same."

He reached for two of the weapons and balanced one on his palm for Emmaline to take. It had a band of metal arching alongside the handle, and when she held it, it surrounded her hand. She continued to glower at his back while they all trailed outside.

The back deck was spacious and empty enough to serve as an impromptu piste, and Hannibal seemed to materialize some black chalk from nowhere, drawing several lines at measured distances apart. He only eyeballed them, but they were flawless as far as Abigail could tell. When he stood up straight again, he and Emmaline aligned themselves on two lines, four metres apart with a dotted one between them. Their weapons looked like the sweeping, alert tails of two big cats; Emmaline's glinted in the sunlight as she shifted on her feet, and Hannibal's shone a solid silver where he held it neatly.

Mischa, Abigail, and Will gathered by the sliding door in their coats to watch. Abigail felt as if she were sitting on a jury, her loyalties tugged in unequal portions and opposite directions.

Emmaline donned her helmet, looked at Hannibal, and hissed, "Don't just *let* me win."

He grinned. "I'm flattered you think it would be necessary."

They both looked at Mischa, who worried at her lower lip, and she nodded.

" *En garde*… " she began. They easily raised their blades. " *Prêt… Allez!"*

It happened in barely more than a second. They darted forward with their blades in tandem, whacked each other in the torso, and danced backwards to their en garde lines, shuffling and resetting once still. Hannibal didn't look injured despite his lack of protective gear.

Mischa called, "That goes to Hannibal."

Emmaline made a rough sound through her teeth from behind the mask.

Abigail blinked. "What?"

Mischa glanced at her and Will and muttered, "If they both hit, the one who attacked first or had the most initiative and aggression gets the point. First to fifteen points wins. *En garde… Prêt… Allez!"*

Again, a few seconds passed. Hannibal lunged, Emmaline flicked her blade to block, then lunged at him until they were scampering up and down the piste. Hannibal eventually slapped his blade onto her shoulder. He was completely unfazed, while Emmaline was visibly panting. Abigail would have killed to see her facial expression, but Emmaline simply squared her shoulders.

" *... Allez!"*

Emmaline struck out with lightning speed and hit Hannibal's elbow while he was midway through blocking her. She skipped backwards and shrieked in victory, throwing a fist in the air. Hannibal grinned.

They went back and forth, both attacking and landing hits. Emmaline's confidence seemed to boost after they were on more equal standing, and with it she grew more aggressive and continued to score. Metal glinted and clanged, and it was all rather elegant. They chased each other back and forth in leaps, shuffles, and glides, Hannibal smirking coolly and silent no matter the outcome. Will's eyes were solidly fixed on him the whole time, while Abigail and Mischa couldn't decide where to look. Mischa seemed to relax and cheered for both with equal vigour.

Eventually, Hannibal had eight points and Emmaline had seven, and they took a break. Emmaline pulled off her helmet, hair matted and face pink with exertion. Her dark eyes were flaming as she looked up at her uncle in defiance.

"Finally something you're average at, huh?" she taunted, but then her face fell and her eyes narrowed. "I told you… not to go easy on me."

Hannibal tipped his head askance. "I have done no such thing, though I am still in the lead by one point. It seems we are evenly matched, so if I'm average, so are you."

Emmaline glared. "I'm the best in my class."

"I never would have guessed," he drawled, looking down his nose at her.

Her jaw clenched, and Abigail looked between the two with snakes uncoiling in her gut.

Mischa hugged Emmaline's shoulders and kissed her hair. "You're doing great, honey."

Emmaline turned on her heel to pace around the deck, donning the helmet and clenching her fists.

. . .

Watching this little show did unexpected things to Will. He leaned on the porch rail, as the ready poise of his lover's stance dissolved into powerful shows of muscle. He danced his opponent around like a cat pawing an intrepid spider. The shiver up Will's back and the heating of his skin had nothing to do with the winter, and he couldn't really be bothered to keep track of the technicalities of the game. When he spared a glance for Emmaline, he noted that she fought more ravenously each time Hannibal scored, but she never grew sloppy.

When they took a break, the two exchanged some snarky banter that Will wished would end so he could grab Hannibal and paw at him. Finally, Emmaline retreated and Abigail and Mischa went in search of more hot chocolate. Will dragged Hannibal inside to the closest empty room and flung him against the wall for a languid, worshipful kiss.

Hannibal chuckled and grabbed his hips, arching a little to encourage him. "Enjoying yourself, Will?"

Will muttered through harsher kisses down the other's neck. "You're so fucking hot. How are you so… Watching you *move* like that… I didn't know you could do that."

His words trailed off as he groaned, feeling Hannibal smile.

"I can do a lot of things."

"Yeah? You'll have to show me," Will gasped. "You've created a monster. I've never been this insatiable in my life."

Hannibal laughed at this and lifted Will off his feet, deepening the kiss and revelling in the needy arms and legs that clutched him back. Will gasped but didn't protest, trusting and indulging until Hannibal finally set him down and held around his waist.

Will ran a hand through his own hair and studied Hannibal properly.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not at all. Most modern fencing weapons are designed for sport, not to maim. I'll likely have some bruises since I opted out of the padded gear."

Will hummed. "And you did that because…"

"Emmaline needed to channel her rage. She's been hostile, and I won't have it for three weeks. It's best to let her feel like she has some power, so I chose an area where she could feasibly surpass me. If I were to simply *let* her win something I'm superior at, she would see right through it and take offense."

Will muffled a disbelieving laugh. “So, you’ve been riling her up with your smugness and that routine about the gear.”

“Precisely,” Hannibal grinned. “As well, sabre fencing allows for more vigorous slashing attacks while the others only permit gentle stabbing, and the right of way rules encourage aggression. I thought it most fitting for my purposes. I insisted she wear the mask so she would not be stifled trying to hide her emotions.”

Will sighed, grinning darkly. “You are *pathological* , Lecter.”

“You already knew that.”

Will kissed him. “I like seeing you all proud of yourself. It’s cute.”

This earned him a genuine peal of laughter, and Hannibal pulled him close to brush their noses together, both cool and pink from being outside. When they rejoined the others on the deck, Hannibal and Emmaline arranged their stances, nodded to one another, and raised their swords. The game went on until they both had fourteen points, and anticipatory tension crackled in the air. Its palpable presence made up for the lack of murmuring water or wind. Finally, they came to the tie breaker, and while Hannibal stood still and poised as ever, Emmaline was practically bouncing on her feet and vibrating out of her skin.

Mischa slid her gaze from her brother to her daughter, holding the tension for a moment as she announced for the final time, “ *En garde … Prêt … Allez!* ”

Emmaline whipped forward, their swords clashed in flicker-fast motions, and they scampered back and forth for longer this time. Both had to duck out of the way several times to avoid being hit, and it seemed to come down to who was brave enough to risk it. Emmaline finally struck Hannibal in the side and leapt away with a giddy shout. Mischa and Abigail clapped uproariously and hollered, and Will joined in with subdued applause because he hadn’t really cared who won in the first place.

Hannibal grinned and deferred to his opponent with a gracious little bow. “Well done, Emmaline. You exemplify the benefits of consistent practice.”

She pulled off her helmet, beaming at him and flushed with exhilaration, then strode closer and held out a firm hand to shake. Hannibal took it, eyes murmuring redly in the sun.

Emmaline’s smile wobbled a bit, but not for lack of sincerity. “That was cool,” she said. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “You’re most welcome.”

Mischa hurried over to clap Hannibal on the back and kiss Emmaline’s cheek, laughing. “Alright, everyone. Inside. It’s cold.”

They filed back into the house, grinning, and Abigail gave Emmaline a tentative high five before they both grinned up at Hannibal. Emmaline went upstairs to shower, Abigail and

Mischa went their own ways, and Will followed Hannibal into the kitchen to watch him make dinner.

“You took that pretty well, bested by a teenager,” Will teased.

Hannibal grinned, tying an apron around his trim hips before selecting a knife and cutting board. “To be a sore loser is cowardly and far more damaging to one’s pride in the long run.”

While he gathered the ingredients for a salad and some fancy pasta dish, Will loosely crossed his arms and leaned on the counter to watch. He’d never be able to stop watching.

“You said you’d never allow me and Jack to lock you up, even if that was me winning fair and square. Mischa thinks you’d gut me if you felt betrayed. I’d say that’s being a sore loser.”

Hannibal glanced at him, then steadfastly focused on slicing red bell peppers. The vibrant, supple flesh seemed to satisfy him. “You and Jack did not play fair,” he countered, “but then again neither did I. Mischa, as usual, is correct, but only in regards to my past self. I was not prepared to sacrifice my freedom, then, as I failed to realize what I needed more. Now that I have you, I know how painful it would be to lose you. Life’s colour and flavour would fade, then ring in my ears like a mockery. I imagine that if you rejected me now, I’d simply turn myself in so you’d always know where to find me when you changed your mind.”

Will’s mouth fell open a little, attempting to free the sudden ache in his throat. He swallowed and croaked, “You would?”

Hannibal paused and turned fully to study him with half-lidded eyes, so close that their warm breaths mingled and their lips could touch. “I would.”

Will squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to say that he never would have rejected Hannibal, never tried to pry him from his life like a set of infected fangs, but it would be a lie. With a few different choices, he could have easily burrowed further into the dark fortress of his denial, leaving Hannibal to adorn its walls with paint. The thought made him dizzy.

Will cradled Hannibal’s face. “Hannibal, I…”

Mischa sauntered in, flustering when she saw them and they hurriedly pulled apart. Will resisted the urge to glare at her.

She cleared her throat and said, “Hi. Sorry. Han, thank you for being so kind to Emmaline today. I know it’s not exactly easy for you, but I’m glad you’re making an effort.”

She wandered over to hug him around the waist, and he smoothed a hand over her hair.

“It’s no trouble at all,” he assured, meeting Will’s eyes above her head to convey his dilemma. He didn’t love Emmaline, but gentleness came somewhat naturally to Hannibal for those he truly did. Mischa did not seem to know that.

She stepped back, smiled up at him, and flitted off down the hall. Will watched all this with hands in his pockets, and Hannibal set water to boil in a pan with oil and seasonings before returning to the salad.

“What did you two discuss earlier today?” he asked lightly.

Will shifted his weight and began to wander around the kitchen. It felt like he was back in the office, Hannibal’s questing eyes tracking his every breath. Will cleared his throat and shrugged, trying to shove away his guilt. He realized that getting rid of Mischa was not going to happen, and it was selfish of him to want that when she made Hannibal so happy.

“We just got to know each other a bit better,” Will said. “You were right that we were threatened by each other. Jealous, I guess. We cleared it up.” He stepped in close, draped himself over Hannibal’s back, and kissed his cheek. “Just enjoy your time with her, okay? You and I have all the time in the world.”

Hannibal’s steady skill faltered and he set aside his knife. A tremor ran through him and he closed his eyes, breathing Will in.

“I’ve never been this happy,” he whispered.

Will grinned. “Neither have I, so let’s just revel in it. Okay?”

Hannibal nodded and accepted a long, sweet kiss, offering gentle hums and moans in return. Will swallowed each noise down, disbelieving in his gluttony, until the water nearly boiled over and they both laughed.

Dinner went by smoothly with cheerful clinks of glass and silverware. Emmaline was still a little tense and performing her compulsive rituals, but the passive aggression had ceased. Over Hannibal’s impeccable cooking, they all discussed books they had read and places they had been; Will followed along well until Mischa and Hannibal got into an illuminated debate about the virtues of opera versus musical theatre. Abigail was practically glowing with mirth and curiosity the whole time, and Hannibal’s eyes danced golden above the rim of his wine glass. He had forgone a suit jacket in favour of a deep blue waistcoat and pale cream shirt. Will took his hand under the table and squeezed, feeling like maybe, just maybe… this family could function.

Eventually, everyone finished eating, and the others went to the living room while Will helped Hannibal clean up. It ended with Hannibal perched on the spotless counter, Will clutched between his legs and sucking his tongue, settling cleanly into their honeymoon phase because this had always been inevitable. Their kisses dragged and sparked like match flame, and Will wanted to pin Hannibal on his back. Anything that pulled them apart throughout the day was like the varying duration between claps of hands.

“Will… Will…”

Will hadn’t expected Hannibal to be so needy, not in the slightest, but it made him wrap his arms more surely around that well-fitted vest.

“You’re staying in my bed tonight,” Will informed him. “I’m tasting every inch of you. I’d have you all day for a week if we were alone.”

Hannibal sounded wrecked. “That’s acceptable.”

“You want me in control, don’t you? You’re all talk. You have such plans for us. I hope they include me making a mess of you.”

Will grinned to himself and licked that full upper lip, torturously slow. Hannibal could only nod, loose and weak, and Will rewarded him with another kiss.

“I understand that just fine.” And another. Hannibal’s trembling made Will sweat. “Don’t worry. I’m sure our imaginations can put something together and pull you apart.”

“Yes, Will.”

“ *Fuck* …”

They both forgot about their company until music once again ventured through the house. It sounded suspiciously like the soundtrack to *Mamma Mia!* When they pulled apart, Hannibal leaned back on one arm, grinned, and absently fixed his hair while they calmed down.

“It seems they’ve entertained themselves,” he mused. “Would you oppose joining them? Mischa is a terribly devoted fan of ABBA, as I’m sure you can tell.”

Will was still half hard and baffled by Hannibal’s ability to switch mental gears, to hop seamlessly from one train of thought to the other.

“Uh, yeah,” he spluttered. “Sure. Unless she’s going to make me dance.”

Hannibal raised a brow and grinned, hopping back off the counter and taking Will’s hand. “Darling, *I’m* going to make you dance. Come.”

He ignored Will’s half-snickered protests and all but dragged him down the hall. In the dim living room, Mischa, Abigail, and Emmaline were sprawled on the plush couch before an unreasonably large TV, engrossed in the sun-soaked shenanigans of a small Greek town.

Will grinned at Hannibal and mumbled, “I didn’t know you even owned a TV.”

“ *We* own said TV, and I do enjoy the occasional film or documentary.”

Mischa threw a hand up without looking at them and gave a dramatic, “ *Sssshhhh!* ”

Hannibal sat in a spacious armchair and beckoned Will to casually drape across his lap. Will blushed but obliged, and Abigail shot them a quick eye roll but never stopped grinning. Will had never seen this movie in full, so he cuddled up to Hannibal with an open mind and found himself laughing with the others. Hannibal didn’t seem too invested in the plot, but he watched with the soft, nostalgic fondness that only Mischa brought out in him, tracing lines onto Will’s forearm with a fingertip. The blue light cast over his features made him look otherworldly.

When the next upbeat song came around, it involved a couple singing on a beach. Will thought it rather cheesy and silly, but Mischa jumped up at the chorus and danced in hopping circles. Her eyes creased with laughter and she flung her hand out to Emmaline.

“Well, come on!” she exclaimed, and Emmaline stood up in a fit of giggles as they tapped their feet, twisted, and bobbed their heads to the verse. Just before the second chorus, Mischa stopped in front of the armchair with her fists on her hips. “Hannibal.”

“Yes, dear?”

“Oh, don’t be stuffy. Come on.”

He grinned, slow and smug, and before Will could yelp in surprise, Hannibal had them both on their feet and twirling. Then, he was pressed up against him and flying away again, all perfectly in time with the music.

“Don’t go wasting your emotion

Lay all your love on me!”

Will’s laughter spilled from him for a long minute, and when he settled down, he leaned against Hannibal and nuzzled his shoulder. He felt drunk, though he’d only had a glass of wine with dinner.

Mischa and Emmaline really went wild, but Hannibal and Will could say they participated. Abigail’s head was thrown against the back of the couch in laughter as she egged them all on. Hannibal, alight with glee, caught Will’s eye again and tucked a curl behind his ear, and time slowed to a hypnotic crawl for a moment in all the chaos. Will was tempted to drop to one knee then and there, though of course he didn’t. On screen, a bunch of men were now dancing on a rickety dock, and one of them had managed to procure a jet ski.

Then, Mischa’s phone rang, and she calmed herself enough to stumble over and grab it off the coffee table. Her face crumpled and paled, blue light now making her look sick. She lunged for the remote and paused the movie, and everyone stilled. Not even a nuclear explosion could have diverted Hannibal’s attention.

Mischa swallowed thickly and announced, “It’s Agent Crawford.”

Chapter 6

Something rancid and oozing curled up in Abigail's gut. This day had been more fun than she'd had in a while, and now here loomed an ominous reality check. Flashing before her eyes, she lost everything, her life upended once again without her consent. The impulse to fight kicked in, and she sat up straight while the room buzzed, a flickering street lamp in the middle of snowy nowhere. Mischa tossed the phone onto the couch like it had cut her.

"I'm not answering it," she declared with a violent shake of her head.

Will unclenched his teeth. "He'll just keep calling back until you do. Might as well get it over with."

She wrung her hands together and eyed the device with a heavy sigh. "Fine."

When she moved to leave the room, Hannibal tipped his chin up and said, "Stay here, please. And put it on speaker."

Will whirled on him. "Are you *out of your mind* ?"

"I won't make a sound. I swear it. Go ahead, Mischa."

His fathomless, warning eyes fixed on Emmaline for a moment, and she shrank back into the couch, shaking as her stare flicked between him and her mother with the phone. Everyone was utterly silent and still.

Mischa cleared her throat and answered politely. "Good evening, Agent Crawford. I thought I made it clear…"

Jack interrupted her, sounding tired and aged. "Sorry to disturb you, Ms. Lecter, but I thought you'd like to know that we have a lead on your brother."

Abigail wanted to cry, and Will looked murderous while Hannibal kept smirking and watching.

Mischa hummed, "Oh?"

"We think he's taken Will Graham and gone somewhere in South America," Jack said. A fraction of the room's tension eased. "You're certain he would have contacted you if he were in Europe, and since he hasn't, it's likely he knew that we'd search there first."

Mischa shut her eyes and rubbed between them. "Jack, that doesn't really narrow it down, does it? You *might* have an entire continent to scour. I told you not to contact me unless you had something obviously substantial. What's the lead?"

"We've frozen Hannibal's assets, and we're tracking several known aliases. A card under one of them was used in North Carolina, Cuba, and Venezuela this past week. It's likely they took

a boat. We've got a team out there now."

Mischa raised a questioning brow at Hannibal, who looked utterly gleeful.

Jack went on. "I hate to ask this of you, but is it possible for you to access your family's old financial records? Perhaps from back in Lithuania? I want to make sure we're thoroughly exhausting his resources."

Mischa scoffed, letting her voice crack with emotion that Abigail suspected was genuine. "If the FBI can't find them, neither can I. A lot from that time was lost, Jack. And I was *four years old* ."

"I understand that," Jack said. "I'm just trying to do the best I can."

"Do it without me," she snapped. "This is a hard time for my daughter and I, and dredging up the past certainly doesn't help. Hannibal is dead to us. I wish you the best of luck with an impossible task, but there is nothing I can do."

Jack started to say something else indiscernible, Emmaline opened her mouth in a silent, impulsive panic, and Mischa hung up the phone before crumbling into tears. Abigail tried to correct her own heavy breathing, but the room was still too sharp in her vision.

Hannibal went to Mischa and took her in his arms, smoothing her hair and whispering encouragement while she sobbed and grabbed loose fists of his waistcoat.

"Y… you son of a…" she cried, "Why'd you have to go and be such a… Y… you know how stressful it is protecting you? I thought they actually…" She slapped his arm and kept crying for a while as everyone else shuffled in awkward silence.

Eventually, she wiped big, dripping tears on her sleeve and grinned at Hannibal with red-rimmed eyes. "How did you pull that off?"

Hannibal smiled back. "Chiyoh."

Mischa's eyebrows flew up. "She… left the castle?"

"Yes. I contacted her shortly after we fled Baltimore, and she was pleased to assist."

Will sat on the arm of the couch beside Abigail, and she gratefully accepted his presence. "Who's Chiyoh?"

"A very close family friend," Hannibal explained. "She was a student of our aunt, and we grew up together. I left a majority of our funds to her for safekeeping when I moved to America, so it could not be traced back to me should I ever find myself a fugitive. The money is stored all over the world, and the FBI does not know that it or Chiyoh exists. So long as we're careful, they will find nothing to trace us by."

Mischa gave a martyred sigh. "I despise lying, Hannibal. How can an expert in behaviour not tell I'm lying?"

Will chuckled. “I often wondered that myself.”

Hannibal grinned at him, then back at Mischa with a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You’ve done wonderfully, dear. Thank you.” He reset himself on the armchair like it was a throne. “Breaking contact with him is best, of course. Uncle Jack is giving you the benefit of the doubt out of compassion, but he cannot trust you entirely, as he has no assurance that you are not loyal to me.”

“Which I am,” Mischa said.

Hannibal’s grin widened and he tipped his head aside. “Thus, you needn’t worry over a thing.” He swiveled his stare to glance over Emmaline, and she froze. Abigail wanted to shield her as he continued. “Should anyone who poses a threat receive credible insight, it would be just as easy to relocate and disappear.”

Emmaline visibly swallowed, but Mischa seemed to relax at his confident words, missing — or overlooking— their veiled threat entirely. Will tentatively smoothed Abigail’s hair, caught her eyes to make sure she was okay, then went back to cuddle with Hannibal. It warmed her heart to see them so at ease together.

“Let’s just finish watching the movie,” Emmaline grumbled, reaching for the remote and seeming to pretend that Hannibal didn’t exist. This lasted for a few minutes as everyone settled down, but Abigail caught her glancing at him every so often.

There was no more dancing, just a serene sort of resignation and comfort like lying in the snow to stare at a misty sky. Will was clearly not watching the movie, just staring reverently up at Hannibal who pretended not to notice.

By the time the movie ended, music and warm blankets had lulled Abigail into a sleepy sense of security. She knew when the others began to rise and tidy up, but her body felt like molasses and she just yawned. Hannibal picked her up with ease to carry her to her room, and she sighed contentedly while her head lolled against his shoulder. Eyes shut, she could still feel Will’s smile, and their footsteps made no sound.

“She’s not really asleep,” Will murmured.

“I know.”

They made a show of putting her to bed and turning off the lights. Hannibal even removed her slippers for her and silenced her cellphone. Grinning, she cracked her eyes open to see their faces in the stream of light from the doorway.

“G’night.”

“Goodnight, Abigail.”

They shut the door, and though she was left nestled in the darkness, for once there was no invisible creature waiting to grab her ankles. Hushed voices and a gold strip of light peeked in from under the door.

Mischa said, “Hannibal… Chiyoh killed her ‘guest,’ didn’t she?”

There was a long moment before he replied. “I trust she did the right thing.”

Mischa’s footsteps retreated in a hurry.

Abigail drifted off to sleep.

. . .

Mischa and Emmaline holed up in their rooms, so Will folded himself into Hannibal’s arms, leaning down to press his face into his chest.

“Hearing Jack’s voice again…” Will mused, “It made our old life seem like decades ago.”

Hannibal threaded his fingers through messy curls, absently stroking and exploring how they shifted. He didn’t seem inclined to say anything, and Will didn’t need him to.

After a few minutes, Will sighed, content. “That was so nice. Putting Abigail to bed, taking care of her, watching her laugh… Hannibal, *thank you* .”

“It was you who made this choice, Will. You’ve built this life as much as I.”

“ *Our* life.” Will tested the words. “ *Our* daughter. *Our* TV.”

Hannibal smiled, taking his hand to kiss his knuckles, but Will couldn’t miss the bundle of tension and nerves that he tried dutifully to hide.

“What’s wrong, Han?”

“I’m sure you’re curious about Chiyoh and her ‘guest’, and I want you to know…”

Will laid a hand on the nape of Hannibal’s neck and tugged him down so their foreheads touched.

“I told you I won’t push you to tell me anything.”

“I want to tell you.”

Will took a breath and gently took his hands. “Come lie down, honey.”

He catalogued the sharp intake of breath and flutter of Hannibal’s eyelashes brought about by the endearment. It appeared that Abigail was right and they were both far more sentimental than they would admit, but Will’s chest filled with a warm glow that he wanted to capture in his hands, bottle, and preserve.

They ventured into his bedroom, where he undressed Hannibal and himself with a soft, confident reverence before securing their tangled bodies beneath thick blankets. Will guided Hannibal to lie over his chest, and Hannibal went easily as they both closed their eyes.

When Hannibal began to tell the story, Will closed his eyes and let his imagination flourish, travelling to Lithuania in 1978. He found himself bewitched by the shadow-clad towers of Lecter Castle, and the fireflies that Hannibal helped Mischa chase while their father played violin for them by the fountain. During the day, Hannibal folded tiny white butterflies between his hands to gently set them free in her hair, and she giggled and clapped until they startled away.

One night, under a pelt of navy sky, winter began to sniff between the trees. A curious chill whispered to the wind, and nine-year-old Hannibal Lecter VIII lounged by his bedroom window, surveying the land. He spotted a fox darting under one of the lampposts that guarded the property's road, its eyes bright disks before it vanished. He was tempted to sneak outside in his pajamas and follow it, eyes glinting red in the dark.

Will wondered what Hannibal's childhood room might have looked like. He doubted that it would be scattered with toys or decked out in seventies band posters. Instead, his mind supplied him with old stone walls and colourful tapestries, a fireplace mantle covered in amateur wood carvings, a canopied bed larger than a kid would ever need, bookshelves, a desk for sketching…

Count Lecter opened the bedroom door, letting in the scents of pine and snow. There was a window left open in the hall.

"Hannibal, Mischa wants you to stay with her tonight. I think the wind is scaring her."

Hannibal smiled fondly and hopped down from his perch. "Okie dokie. I'll be right there."

He grabbed a pad of paper, pencils, and the knife he used to sharpen them, setting off for Mischa's room to find her burrowed under the covers in a tiny ball. Hearing the door open, she whimpered and Hannibal hushed her gently, climbing up beside her.

"Mischa, the wind can't hurt you. Will you come out of there and draw with me?"

She peeked her tousled golden head out and settled into his side. Hannibal sketched animals and magical creatures for her by lamp light, and she watched, mesmerized, until she fell asleep.

Shortly after, a cut-off scream rang out from deep in the castle, and Hannibal, coiling his arms protectively around his sister, sat up to listen. Nothing. It had undoubtedly come from one of the staff, for whom he had no concern. A few moments later, familiar footsteps hurried down the hall with a swishing of fabric. Their parents burst in, easing the door silently shut behind them and turning to their stoic and curious son.

"Hannibal, give me Mischa," their father ordered.

Hannibal allowed him to take her and bundle her up in a blanket, then pull a second one from a storage chest and give it to him. The boy tugged it around his shoulders and slipped the pencil-sharpening knife up his sleeve.

“We’re going outside,” he guessed. “Mama, what’s happening? Don’t lie to me. I heard a scream.”

She had been pulling the bottom drawers out of Mischa’s finely crafted wardrobe and setting them aside, revealing a hole in the floor beneath that entered a dark tunnel, musty from disuse. Now, she turned and set a gentle but firm hand on her son’s face.

“I would never lie to you,” she whispered. Hannibal watched the beauty mark by her eye shift with the movement of her lips. Simonetta was clever and enchanting; Hannibal would have followed her anywhere.

“People want to hurt us,” he surmised.

“Yes. Six of them. Come.”

She eased him through the tight square opening into the tunnel, passing Mischa down into his arms. Then, she slipped in and her husband followed, taking the girl back.

Hannibal arched his brow as his mother took his hand and they began to run on silent feet by the pale beam of a flashlight. Occasionally, it caught on the gaping maws where other tunnels connected, yawning open for a blink as if the walls wailed in foreboding. His mother’s nightgown and long chestnut hair flung about behind her, and her hand didn’t sweat against Hannibal’s smaller palm.

“Won’t they see the drawers missing and know to come after us?” he asked.

Her voice came airy and sing-song: “We’ll be long gone by then. Long gone.”

Hannibal kept glancing back at the bundle of Mischa, who still slept in innocence. His father’s dark eyes tried to hold reassurance, but some of it spilled.

Eventually, two holes and a cracked mouth of moonlight peeked through an old wooden door. Hannibal looked up and felt the outside leering at him, a warning.

“Mama…”

She shushed him with a fingertip, eyes flashing. “We don’t know where they are,” she admitted. “The woods are mere steps away.”

His grip tightened on her hand and he glanced at Mischa again.

His father gently urged, “Go on, Hannibal.”

They all emerged from the door to face an army of shadowy pine trees, pitch black patterns on the sky. Hannibal admitted that he didn’t remember how long they were running through the snow for, only that his feet, soaked through, did not feel cold. Recounting it all, he spoke with the aloof denial of time and distance, but his emotions soaked through each choice of words and absent fingertips tracing Will’s shoulder.

Will smoothed a hand up Hannibal’s back. “So, who were these people?”

Hannibal sighed and sneered, “It’s hardly unbelievable that someone would want monarchs and nobles dead. I don’t especially care what they wanted, only that Mischa and I are alive and apart from it all. As far as I’m concerned, my father was the last Count Lecter. I much prefer ‘Doctor,’ as it’s a title I earned with my own skill and volition.” He grinned. “I’ll admit I grew fond of the ‘Chesapeake Ripper’ as well.”

Will nodded, huffing a gentle laugh. “So did I. I feel like I’m in over my head with the fancy lineage, though.”

Hannibal kissed his forehead. “I can stop if you’d like.”

“No! Uh, no. Tonight’s about you. I’m sorry. Finish if you want to.”

Another kiss. “Very well.” A smirk. “There is no shame in simple curiosity, Will.”

Will shut his eyes.

The Lecter family ended up in a large clearing near the back of their property, where a moderately sized cabin stood dark off to its side. Its decor favoured velvet upholstery and knitted throw blankets, mounted boars’ heads and antlers. A curling golden bannister framed a graceful set of stairs, beckoning guests to cozy bedrooms and an art studio. Hannibal often ventured here in the summer when he wanted to be truly alone. The drafty halls of the castle made him feel watched.

His father kicked the locked door in, as they hadn’t time to retrieve its key, then barricaded it behind them with a heavy armchair. He knelt to start a fire in the hearth, Simonetta whispered to a confused, half-awake Mischa on the sofa, and Hannibal stood by the door observing.

“What am I to do if they find us?” he asked, already having several plans of his own.

His mother blinked warily. “Hide yourself and Mischa. Hide and don’t make a sound.”

She reached out and told him to come closer, laying that same gentle, steady hand on his face. Their eyes were matching shades of deep golden brown, firelight catching their shifting red hues. She told him to sleep, that help should be there by morning. Simonetta did not lie, but she was prone to idealistic flights of fancy. They all piled together in the living room for a shallow sleep, not willing to let one another out of their sights. Hannibal sat awake, cross-legged on the floor in a pile of blankets and bodies, staring into the dying coals.

It happened some time around dawn, and he smothered the flames, mourning their warmth. Footsteps crunched in the snow by the treeline, and the breeze that promised snow carried the stench of gunpowder and strangers’ exerted flesh.

Hannibal woke his parents, who nodded and barely concealed the fear in their eyes, then he stood and took Mischa in his arms.

“Anniba?”

“Shhhh.”

He pulled himself up to curl suspended in the base of the chimney, pushing against either side with his back and feet. Then, he pulled Mischa up and supported her feather-light weight with his own body. It was sooty and rough with brick, but they fit. The flat of the knife sat cold against his arm.

Mischa glowered. “Yucky.”

“ *Sshhhh* .”

The intruders whispered to each other outside the cabin, too muffled to hear, then made an earnest effort to kick the door down. When the armchair wouldn’t budge, they smashed the windows and flooded in. The apparent ringleader barked orders to search the place, smearing slushy footprints all over the house.

Eventually, one of them cried out and a loud thumping noise echoed from the kitchen, followed swiftly by scrambling on tile and a gunshot. Ice leapt into Hannibal’s throat, and he clamped a hand over Mischa’s mouth to keep her from sobbing at the noise.

Longer minutes passed until one of the strangers called, “I’ve got the lady!”

Simonetta growled and fought them, apparently getting in a few sickening *thwacks* before a loud crash rattled Hannibal’s bones. He wanted to run in and scream until they all dropped dead, but he forced himself to stay still as a brick, curled around his sister.

A gunshot.

The killers were silent for a moment, then one of them snapped, “Where are the kids?”

“Fucking moron, did you let them get away?”

“Shut the fuck up! I never even saw them.”

Hannibal couldn’t be bothered to differentiate their gaggle of voices as they bickered. To him, they were all the same snarling, drooling monster out of his sight. A sliver of morning light cast in through the wire mesh atop the chimney, illuminating Mischa’s sticky red face and the tears that shone in her faraway eyes. She was not responsive to attempts at eye contact or soothing touches to her hair. At least she knew not to make a sound.

“Go out and search the woods again. They might have tried to run. Dortlich, you stay and we’ll pack up the valuables.”

Hannibal made note of the name, resolving that he wouldn’t need such information because he’d kill them all before they could leave. They began to root around the house in search of anything worth taking, but there was always at least one downstairs, so Hannibal wouldn’t take the risk of trying to escape yet. A while passed, and he grew increasingly unable to feel his body, cramped up in the tiny crypt and trying not to tumble into the ashes.

“It’s fucking cold,” the ringleader muttered. “Start a fire, will you?”

Hannibal returned completely to reality at that, eyes narrowing. Someone tossed firewood beneath where he and Mischa hovered, the hands barely a foot away. He observed the hands for a second, waiting until they were at the right angle, then flicked his own hand down and dragged the knife through hairy, frost-bitten flesh, long and deep enough into the wrist that it could bleed out within minutes.

The thing howled and scrambled backward, yelling and gawking as if it would do him any good. Hannibal shoved the firewood out of the way, then slunk down into blessed open space, leaving a trembling Mischa carefully behind him in the soot. Footsteps pounded down the stairs just as Hannibal jammed the knife into the first one's throat. The second one's scraggly hands tried to grab Hannibal, but he whipped to the side and managed to slice another arm before it tackled him to the ground and plucked the knife away. Hannibal tried to lunge up and bite, but the thing only laughed.

"Clever brats," it jeered, before scooping them both up and knocking their heads together hard enough that Hannibal ceased to think.

When he woke, he and Mischa were chained up to the staircase landing, and all the other pigs had returned to snort and gripe.

"... gotten rid of the bodies."

"Then let's get out of here."

"... weather."

"...t's fine…"

"... never make it in that."

"... a little while. No one came after us."

"... new game plan."

"Fine."

So, days passed. The food supply in the neglected cabin was limited. They all rationed some canned fruits, crackers, and dry breakfast cereal, with Hannibal and Mischa getting the bare minimum. Eventually, they resorted to scooping handfuls of baking flour and sugar and licking their hands clean.

"This is bullshit," one of the pigs declared after nearly two weeks had gone by.

The onslaught of snow yielded fairly quickly, but it had not yet melted, leaving them snowed in and their sense of direction obliterated. One of the pigs had managed to get out and search for escape routes, but it never came back.

The following day, the pigs devised a plan. Hannibal woke to one of them creeping up the stairs and unlocking Mischa's chain.

“N-no…” he croaked.

They dragged her downstairs, and she cried, “Anniba! Anniba!”

Hannibal scrambled forward and nearly fell down the stairs until he realized that the chain would not let him near. He remembered screaming but not its sound, rattling the bars of the railing and screaming back, but he could not recall the long time in which he watched them cut off her leg, nor the following minutes when the pigs all scrambled for their share of her flesh.

When they were done, they tied up Mischa's wound, though it still bled profusely through its dressings until they added a makeshift tourniquet from strips of torn fabric. She was thankfully unconscious through it all, passed out from the shock, but they did not return her to Hannibal. Instead, one of them bundled her up on the couch as if in a makeshift apology. One of them tossed a bit of her bone with no marrow up onto the landing, perhaps assuming that Hannibal would gnaw on it. Instead, he held it to his chest, trying somehow to purify what was violated by hands and blood and slobber. He didn’t take his eyes off her for the rest of the day, and he did not sleep.

That dreadful night, Hannibal caught two of the pigs awake and muttering to each other while the rest slept fitfully.

“I think it’s infected,” one said, studying Mischa with intense unease. They had her leg unwrapped, and Hannibal wanted to gouge out their eyes for looking upon it.

“No shit,” mumbled the other one. “At least the other one’s salvageable.”

It wasn’t clear if they meant Mischa’s other leg or Hannibal himself, but he was not going to wait to find out.

“I can help,” he croaked. “I know how to clean and bandage it.”

One of the pigs looked up forlornly but did not meet his eyes. “Look, kid, we didn’t mean for all of this to happen. Just… shut up and do what Grutas says.”

“You meant to kill my parents. Let me help my sister.”

They swallowed and slowly approached him, unlocking the chain and unleashing Hannibal Lecter upon the world. They saw no threat in such a starved, grieving little thing. He staggered to his unused feet and set off for the kitchen, seeking clean towels, the first aid kit in its heavy case under the sink, and a large knife which he concealed under the towels.

The two pigs shuffled around over his shoulder while Hannibal knelt beside Mischa. He carefully pulled back the blanket that covered her, and he found that they had taken her other leg too. Blood was soaking through the couch, and Mischa’s breath was a mere flutter. Her flesh was peeled open and exposed in shredded, veiny clusters around knobs of exposed bone.

If Hannibal's concealed rage had been stewing before, it now boiled to a steady explosion and he did his best with another tourniquet and some bandages. Then, he leaned forward, trembling slightly, and kissed Mischa's forehead before chucking the first aid kit up at one of the pigs' heads. The thing was startled enough that Hannibal could jump up from the couch and stab the other in the throat while both were distracted. The one he had hit was stumbling, and Hannibal kicked him in the knees to bring him down and stab him to death as well. The give of flesh under his meager strength felt like sinking one's boots into mud.

He watched them bleed out silently on the carpet, their terrified eyes scouring him until their bodies twitched no more. The others were still sleeping, malnourished, exhausted and none the wiser, and the cabin took on a marked shift when he was alone among their pitiful snuffling. The air they breathed was less oppressive now but no less foul. The only source of red-tinged light was running on the last of their firewood, and Hannibal considered letting them all freeze to death. It would certainly be cleaner.

He only considered it for a moment.

He cut one's throat as if tidying up his room, utterly drenched in blood. When he approached the last one who sprawled by the fireplace and snored, Hannibal politely tapped him awake with the flat of the knife. The pig woke, took in his surroundings, and opened his mouth in a soundless, jaw-shaking scream. Hannibal's triumphant smile did not even have all its permanent teeth, as he requested the name of the one who vanished into the snow days prior.

When the room reeked like copper and iron, and not a puff of rancid lungs could be heard, Hannibal set the knife down and hurried to Mischa's side. He stroked her hair and she didn't move.

"You'll be safe, Mischa," he whimpered. "Stay with me."

As he began to bundle her up for his inevitable trek through the woods, the blankets caught on something. He pulled it aside, and there lay Mischa's other leg. Apparently the two who snuck it hadn't gotten to it yet. Perhaps it was out of shame.

In the present, Will swallowed the thick lump of tar in his throat.

Hannibal stared at nothing and whispered, "I was exhausted and starving. I couldn't get her to safety in that state, and the thought of leaving any part of her behind sickened me. I couldn't let her rot with those worthless monsters. I couldn't let her go to waste."

Will slid his hand up to stroke soothing circles into Hannibal's neck and shoulder. "She doesn't know, does she?"

"She does not," Hannibal said. "No one did until now. I fed her bits of our captors, and though I'm sure she suspects that part, we have never acknowledged it."

"Did you…" Will couldn't believe what he said next, but there was no revulsion, only acceptance of this creature he held so close. "Did you feed her… herself?"

Hannibal arched a melancholy brow. “I did not. I suppose I was in no state to be so creative, but in hindsight I could have given her back what was taken.”

Will sighed. “Holy fuck, Hannibal. I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s over,” Hannibal huffed. “It’s long in the past. No one event made me what I am, Will. You have to understand that.”

“I do.”

“Good. Ultimately, I dragged Mischa back through the woods on a sled, and we were found by staff who were tending the castle in our absence. Most who knew of us presumed us dead. Once we physically recovered, we went to stay with our aunt and uncle, but that is not a story for tonight.”

Will caressed Hannibal’s side, and Hannibal leaned up to nuzzle his throat.

“Thank you,” Will whispered.

“You’re welcome.”

“So, Chiyoh’s prisoner is the guy who got away?”

“I adore your perception, Will. I tracked him down years later and left him in her care. Since he did not partake in harming Mischa, I saw fit to let him live a life of misery in exchange for our parents.”

“You said he’s probably dead now. How do you feel about that?”

“Indifferent. He died in that cabin with the others. The life he lived after that was not a life.”

Will swallowed, suddenly swamped by unease. “A life imprisoned. The life you said you’d accept… for me.”

“Indeed it is.” Hannibal idly twirled Will’s hair around deft fingers.

“Fuck…” Will sobbed, clutching at Hannibal’s face to kiss his cheekbones, then his jaw, then brow and nose and every other bit of precious, fire-warmed skin. When did Will start crying? “Hannibal, I… No. No, no, no. You’re *never* going… No. I’m not letting that happen. Does your stubborn ass hear me? You’re not going to prison. Ever.”

“You’re more upset than I am. Nothing happened to me, Will. I happened.”

“I know. Just… you were just a kid and you killed five people.”

“Since then I’ve killed a hundred and twenty-four, making the total a hundred and twenty-nine. I’m managing perfectly well.”

Will choked on oxygen and took a moment to blink.

Hannibal smirked. “Regrets, Will?”

“No, Hannibal. No.”

“Good. Kiss me.”

Will swallowed and took a long, steadying breath. Oh, he wanted to. Why the *hell* did that number turn him on? He wanted to take Hannibal far away from those old rooms in his memory, but… he recognized that flirtatious change of subject for the deflection it was.

He lightly touched Hannibal’s chin and murmured, “Not right now. That’s not what you need.”

Hannibal’s brow furrowed. “Are you patronizing me?”

“No,” Will promised. “I want you to listen to me, and if you really feel like I’m wrong, we don’t have to talk about it anymore.” He took Hannibal’s silence as a cue to continue. “Have you ever… mourned? Taken the time to really *feel* the leftover emotions? I’m honoured that you told me, but you told it like it happened to someone else, and it makes me wonder if you’ve ever really faced it.”

Hannibal looked away, eyes half-mast, and stopped playing with Will’s hair.

“I’m not sure what you mean by that. I saw a therapist when I was young. He wasn’t much help. Doctor du Maurier and I never discussed my past.”

“Have you ever cried, or… *anything* ?”

“Not over my family. The grief and terror simply never resurfaced in such a blatant way.”

“That implies it resurfaced in other ways.”

“I don’t wish to discuss it anymore. I want you to kiss me.” Hannibal swallowed and blinked, a hint of desperation showing through his sparkling eyes, and it reminded Will of the day Tobias Budge attacked them. They had studied each other with such incomprehensible relief that Will could still feel it reformed into gratitude.

“I was worried you were dead.”

His heart tightened up at the memory only to collapse into shivering sand and blow in the wind. Will wiped some of his own tears on the back of his hand, but Hannibal caught it and kissed them away.

Will whispered, “I can’t imagine a world without you anymore.”

Hannibal caressed his face and held him close with the occasional brush of lips. “I love you, Will.”

Everything converged on Will, then. Their past life, Hannibal trusting him with that story and the vivid grief Will’s imagination lent to it, the enormity of fresh emotions he didn’t know

how to handle… and he sobbed in earnest, Hannibal slowly becoming needy and tender as well.

Will finally gave him that kiss. “I love you too. *Oh* , wow… Holy shit. I love you.”

On and on he whispered and kissed, then leaned over and smoothed a hand up and down Hannibal’s waistline until he relaxed, pliant and gently moaning.

“Will…” It was a breath of awe.

“There you are. Let me see you.” Will brushed a lock of Hannibal’s hair off his face. “I want to see you when you’re scared or jealous or hurting. I never want you to hide. You can hide from the people who want to take you away, but you don’t hide from me.”

“I never wanted to hide from you,” Hannibal murmured. “I want more than anything for you to see.”

“I see you.” Will collapsed against his chest with a tongue-filled kiss.

Hannibal whimpered and snuggled closer, mouth flushed and clingy. His silent stream of tears left a dark patch on his pillow, but he smiled. His eyes took on the unfocused, faraway film of slipping into a daydream, and he reclined back into the pillows until he was sobbing and tried to hide his face. Will cupped his jaw and guided him back,

“What’s wrong, baby?”

Hannibal whispered, “I’ve sought the world in all its forms, each delight and pain it has to offer, and it’s led me here. Watching your perfect mind devour itself in flame felt like basking in winter’s first warm sunlight, withering ice to reveal paradise beneath. Do you understand?”

Will nodded. “Yes.”

Stealing Will’s breath, Hannibal moved lightning quick and pinned him hard on his back, immobile. Will grit his teeth and glared, longing to bite him. Gone was the vulnerable creature with melting golden eyes, replaced by something wild and bristling.

“Do you *understand* , Will?”

He let the pendulum swing.

I will never be what you expect. I will move and change on a whim. You cannot keep me in one perfect moment, nor can I do the same. Can you feel the places where my humanity doesn’t fit snugly? Will you find me when I neatly fold my control and put it away, always where I can see it though I won’t always be looking? I feel I may run from my body, venture into places where I cannot physically go. I move through the world with myself in a glass, and I hold it carefully, but I’m always preventing a spill. I’m giving it to you in the hopes of easing the burden, that you are vigilant when I need and reckless when it’s feasible. This is my… completion.

Will's hands twitched, fingers curled and flexing on the bed. Half convinced that he would have claws if he looked, he threw his weight forward, knocking Hannibal off onto his back and pinning him by the wrists above his head.

"I understand."

Hannibal's eyes cleared, softening again. His shifting components would give Will whiplash if he didn't love it so much. He gripped Hannibal's bared neck perhaps slightly too hard, stroking with thumbs and a hint of nails just beneath his sharp jawline. Hannibal groaned, wanton in approval.

"I'm *in awe of you* ," Will whispered into his lips, as he felt pieces of himself fall back and wail like a storm. "Fuck. You extraordinary bastard." They peppered each other in kisses. "I want to tear your throat out to make sure you're real and mortal."

Hannibal met his eyes, defiant of Will's hesitance. "Then do it."

Will gripped him around the middle, tilting his hips up to make him go limp in seeking arms. No meeting of mouths was hard enough, it seemed; frustrated with that observation and increasingly desperate, he wanted to bash their heads together until their skulls caved in and nothing remained but exposed brain and combined gore. Hannibal would allow it.

Will shifted to lie on top of him and couldn't muster more stamina than that, so they ground their hips together through pajama pants until warm waves washed over and swept them away. They smothered sweet, desperate moans into one another's mouths and exchanged suck bruises everywhere that wouldn't be seen. Once, Hannibal nearly marked Will's jaw, but Will playfully nudged him away and paid him back with a long, ravenous kiss to each nipple. This made Hannibal *whine* and open his legs to aimlessly buck his hips; Will grinned wickedly as he watched, making note of the shameless display. After meandering around their bodies for long enough to exhaust them, they lay together gasping and saturated with lingering passion.

Hannibal eventually broke away and pulled Will's hand up to study it in detail, pecking and nibbling at each finger without making eye contact. He splayed out, relaxed and trusting, while Will leaned on the headboard and cradled him to his chest like a drenched cat: a fierce, imploring, mewling little thing. Snuggling came with gentle nuzzles and more stolen lips, and Hannibal couldn't stop himself from biting the pulse below Will's ear as it fluttered.

How easy either man would have been to crush.

Chapter 7

Abigail woke in some wee hour of the morning to pacing and shuffling in the hall. The sun was about an hour from rising, casting a muted silver glow over her room.

“Will?” she ventured just loud enough to be heard.

“Uh, it’s Emmaline,” came the muffled reply. “Sorry.”

Abigail unfolded herself from the blankets, threw on a robe, and padded out of her room to find the other girl. She hovered by the top of the staircase, taking a step down, then up, down and up, making her ponytail bounce.

“Emmaline, what’s wrong?”

She grit her teeth and whacked her fists against her thighs. “I can’t go down the *fucking* stairs! I can’t do anything in this house. I feel like I’m suffocating and dehydrating in the middle of an ocean.”

Abigail shifted awkwardly. “That sucks.”

“You think?”

Emmaline plopped herself down on the highest step and Abigail sat beside her. She studied the elaborately carved bannister, gleaming with polish, and they both surveyed what they could see of the main floor.

Abigail asked, “So, why can’t you go down the stairs?”

A long, heavy sigh. “I feel like the house is going to burn down if I do it wrong. There are other things too, but… I can’t explain it to you. It makes no sense and logic doesn’t help. I just kind of… wait it out, but then it’ll be something else.”

For a few more minutes they sat in silence, but then Emmaline’s eyes sharpened like she had an idea. Sure enough, she jumped to her feet, looking over the railing to the floor below.

“There are other ways of getting downstairs.”

Abigail just blinked, increasingly wary as she recognized a Lecter possessed of the impulse to raise hell.

Emmaline added, “We should slide down the bannister.”

“Like Mary Poppins?” Abigail scoffed, glancing down the sprawling helical staircase with a wave of vertigo. “I’ve had enough of almost dying, thanks.”

The other girl went very still, leaning one hip on the rail and crossing her arms to study Abigail closely.

“You go first,” Emmaline offered.

“I’m going back to bed,” Abigail countered without moving.

“Do it or I’ll push you.”

Abigail froze, heart lurching before pounding noisily. “What?”

“You heard me.” Emmaline studied her, blank-faced but buzzing with giddy energy.

Abigail’s brow knit, and she stepped deeper into the hall. “I… can’t tell if you’re serious.”

Emmaline just blinked, and a long moment passed.

One of her arms began to move, and with a galloping heart Abigail shoved her hard with both hands.

Emmaline stumbled backwards with a shriek, feet slipping on the next few stairs as she grabbed onto the bannister and held herself up, crashing into it and clinging on for dear life. With mussed hair and wild, frantic eyes, she looked back up at Abigail. Both girls were panting and shaking, Abigail choking on air and feeling exactly how she did when that knife clawed its way into Nick Boyle’s flesh and her nightmares.

“Fuck,” Emmaline croaked. “Holy shit. You actually just…”

Abigail blinked tears away. “You… you were going to…”

Emmaline scoffed, near hysterical. “No! Bitch, *of course I was joking*. I was going to fix my hair right then!”

Before Abigail could reply, Mischa hurried down the hall in her robe with pajama-clad Hannibal and Will in tow. They all surveyed the scene, and Emmaline scrambled to her feet with white knuckles on the railing. For a moment they all just stared at one another: Mischa frantic, Will grumpy, and Hannibal curious.

“What’s going on?” Mischa cried, eyes darting between the girls.

Emmaline’s mouth hung open but no sound came, so Hannibal turned to Abigail expectantly and Abigail swallowed.

“We were talking…” she stumbled through a recount, ending with, “I… pushed her.”

“ *What* ! ” Mischa shrieked, beckoning Emmaline into her arms and fussing over her. “Are you alright, honey?”

Emmaline grumbled, “F-fine.”

Will was leaning on the wall, one hand covering his amused smirk.

Hannibal didn’t bother. “Well,” he said, eyes bright. “At least it appears no one was hurt.”

He glanced at Abigail with… *pride.* She quivered beneath it, but not in fear.

Mischa threw a furious glare at him. “Hannibal! How can you be glib? Is this what you’ve been teaching your daughter?”

“I had no part in this, dear. Abigail is a product of her own free will.”

“Well, I told you she was trouble! Coming from a father like Hobbs, what did you expect? She helped him kill teenage girls, for christ’s sake! I turn the other cheek to a lot of things, Hannibal, but I *cannot* condone her hurting my daughter. I trusted you when you took Abigail in *and* when we came to visit here, but evidently that was a mistake.”

Abigail grit her teeth and smothered the remnants of shame that she would always carry. Hannibal and Will were teaching her to embrace who she was, embrace the monster who liked killing Nick Boyle, but Hobbs never empowered her as an accomplice to his crimes; he’d only seen her as a doll for his satisfaction. His name on Mischa’s panic-sharp tongue stuck venomous needles in Abigail’s vital organs.

Will opened his mouth and stepped forward to argue, roiling with anger of his own, but Hannibal laid a placating hand on his shoulder.

Hannibal said, “Mischa, one does what one must to survive. Abigail did what she had to do, then and now. If Emmaline wants to make idle threats, then she should be prepared to face the consequences.”

Emmaline muffled a sob into her mother’s chest, still trembling. As far as Abigail could tell, the other girl’s distress was genuine, but Abigail couldn’t bring herself to feel guilty.

. . .

Will watched all of this with a repressed urge to snicker, but Abigail’s shock and sorrow permeated his empathy with a strength he’d become familiar with. There was nothing he really wanted to say to Mischa, so he let Hannibal deal with it until she began to scold them about Abigail. Protective fury rose in him faster than he could manage, but thankfully Hannibal stopped him from going all Randall Tier on her.

Eventually, Mischa began to run out of steam and fidget. With a hiss of pain, she moved a hand to her leg and tried to adjust it. Will guessed that she’d donned her prosthetics improperly in a haste, and they were growing uncomfortable. Hannibal, as always, swooped in with that level tone.

“It’s very early yet. Mischa, dear, why don’t you return to bed and rest your mind. I’ll ensure Emmaline has not incurred any terrible contusions.”

Emmaline’s eyes flickered nervously, but Mischa seemed to relax. “Okay, but I don’t want the girls left alone together again.” She gently patted Emmaline’s face and asked, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I… um. Yes, I’m okay, Mum.”

“Okay…”

Mischa anxiously let her daughter go and kept glancing over her shoulder as she left. Once she was gone, Abigail fidgeted but didn’t tear her eyes from Hannibal. Will raised a brow and went to her with gentle fingertips under her chin.

“You okay?”

She nodded jerkily.

Will added, “Mischa doesn’t know you.”

Hannibal joined their little cluster with a hand on Will’s back and a kiss to Abigail’s forehead. When they separated a moment later, he went back to directing. Emmaline was making herself small against a nearby corner, eyes darting between the family and seemingly unable to flee.

“Emmaline,” he said mildly. “Come here, please.”

She swallowed and stayed put, shaking. After brief consideration, Hannibal went to her and stopped an arm’s reach away. They studied each other, his head tipped in interest and her expression slack with searching eyes.

He whispered, “Were you going to do it?”

“Push her?” Emmaline sobbed, breaking eye contact. “ *No* !”

Will knew she was telling the truth, so of course Hannibal did too.

When he said nothing, Emmaline went on. “I’m sorry, okay? Y-you can’t kill me…”

“I’m aware of that.” Hannibal gently touched her hair, her ear, her jaw. “You needn’t be afraid here.”

“I can’t control my fear,” she blurted, voice cracking.

Will studied the scene, Emmaline’s slight frame making her look like a mouse before a panther. Regardless, her bold stare rose back to Hannibal’s and he offered just a shadow of a grin. Something about her entertained him, regardless of how he’d prefer her out of the way, making her just about as lucky as Freddie Lounds.

“I know,” Hannibal murmured. “I’m eager to see where that leads you.”

With that, he left her and guided everyone back to their rooms. Abigail slid into bed and stared at the ceiling, watching sunlight lick across it until late in the morning.

. . .

Will woke up alone, but this time he was dazed and disoriented. Nothing quite looked real as he tracked his eyes over the sculpted ceiling. One corner was not perfectly aligned. Taking a

deep breath through his nose, it was loud in the silence and made his head float slightly.

He and Hannibal had gone back to bed after the staircase debacle, and when Will grumbled about not being able to fall asleep again, Hannibal took it upon himself to… help. He'd kissed Will slowly enough to muddle his brain without exciting him, continuously breathing each other's air with the lack of distance between them. After a while of this, Hannibal kissed languidly down Will's writhing body and held his cock in his mouth for the next half hour, suckling occasionally to make Will tremble and melt. Will vaguely recalled the nonsense babble he'd been slurring before he fell asleep with half-formed moans on his tongue, sedate pleasure weighing his limbs, and a limp hand in Hannibal's hair.

Now, he fixed his eyes on the bedside clock, half convinced he'd been dreaming.

"It's ten-oh-two a.m. I'm in Ontario, Canada, and my name is Will Graham."

With a strained stretch, he sat up and worked the kinks out of his joints.

"Hannibal?"

He must have been downstairs again. Will grit his teeth, then yawned wide. As much as he wanted Hannibal to have a good time with his sister, he ached to wake up in his lover's arms and sleepily fuck him before the blankets' warmth faded. He wanted Hannibal, still hoarse of voice and bleary, crying out into his mouth and scrabbling at his shoulders in the early light. Blinking, Will took a deep breath and marvelled at how quickly his reservations about intimacy had vanished.

He took his time going about his morning routine, then ventured downstairs to find Hannibal and Mischa in the living room. They faced one another on the couch while Mischa painted Hannibal's nails dark purple to match her own. Both siblings were smiling —Hannibal more so with his eyes while Mischa flashed all her teeth— and he listened to her tell a story in Lithuanian, resting his chin on his folded knee. Mischa said, "Mama," "Chiyoh," and a few names that Will didn't recognize.

He stalled in the doorway and considered fleeing down the hall, swallowing around gravel in his throat. He felt like an intruder in the moment, separate and alien, jarred into the realization that Hannibal had lived four decades without him. He'd had an entire life that Will would never know completely, and the brief taste of time they'd shared last night opened a ravenous chasm in Will's mind. It was parched and dry, begging for the floodgates of information to open and admit a reservoir that roiled where he couldn't see. He craved everything about this man who'd stolen Will's own life by peeling back his heart and brain.

Mesmerized, he watched Hannibal's steady hands where he splayed them for Mischa to reach. His long fingers bore faint smudges of graphite from sketching and a callous where the pencil would rest on his knuckle. The rich shade of purple on his deceptively rounded nails stood out like blood against warm golden skin. A long, old scar followed his knuckles, parallel and jagged; Will tamped down his curiosity for now, but he sensed a story there.

He was in love. Smiling, he recalled the whispered words and how right they had felt, vaguely wondering what kind of ring would best compliment those colours… scolding

himself for diving so quickly into thoughts like that. It shocked him. It thrilled him. He leaned on the doorframe, and only when Hannibal greeted him with a proper smile did he realize a moment had passed.

“Good morning, Will.”

Will’s face warmed and he scratched his nape. “G’morning. Uh, hi, Mischa.”

She glanced at him. “Morning.”

Clearing his throat and shuffling, Will said, “I’ll… go.”

With a chuckle and soft eyes, Hannibal replied, “Will, please. Sit.”

“You sure?”

“You’re family, Will.”

Hannibal glanced at Mischa, who glanced at Will and donned a smile that didn’t hit her eyes. She sighed.

“Well, then, get over here.”

Will arranged himself on the couch so he could hug Hannibal from behind and nuzzle his shoulder, warm and certain with a deep inhale of tasteful aftershave. Hannibal nudged back fondly and closed his eyes. Meanwhile, Mischa averted her stare and neatly applied colour to Hannibal’s thumb. The nail polish was an odorless brand, sparing sensitive noses. Will couldn’t take his eyes off those slender fingers, relaxed and spread apart by a foam tool.

“I didn’t know you liked this sort of thing,” he murmured.

“Yes, well, Mischa is difficult to dissuade, and gender expectations are subjective. Does it bother you?”

“Not at all.” Will laid a hard, chaste kiss on his jaw, and a smile erupted without his permission. “The cannibalism is fine, but I *draw the line* at nail polish.”

Hannibal grinned up at him, but Mischa tensed and swallowed thickly. A slight tremor ran through her hands, which Hannibal undoubtedly felt. A sad veil passed over his eyes as he glanced into the middle distance, and Mischa hunched her shoulders to focus more deliberately on her task. Will, tempted to throttle her, overcompensated by kissing the pulse at Hannibal’s throat and tightening his embrace.

Will studied Mischa. “Compartmentalizing?”

“Mm?” She glanced back up and airily muttered, “No. I’m fine. ‘It’s gotta be a rose ‘cause it rhymes with Mose…’”

Hannibal raised a brow. “Pardon?”

Cheeky this time, Mischa looked him in the eye and smiled. "'Moses supposes his toeses are roses.' It's from *Singin' In the Rain.* "

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar."

Mischa shook her head in mock disbelief, and Will snickered with a gentle elbow to Hannibal's gut.

"Come on, Hannibal," he teased. "Moses supposes his toeses are roses, but Moses supposes erroneously. Everyone knows that."

Mischa looked delighted and began to bob her head to the rhythm, eventually breaking into song. Will joined in, waggling his eyebrows at Hannibal, who looked utterly baffled. Soon, Will and Mischa were laughing hysterically, doubled-over while Hannibal watched them with unmistakable fondness and confusion.

"Are you two making fun of my name?"

This sent Mischa into a fresh round of giggles, flopping forward to lean on him. "I don't know what our parents were thinking," she garbled.

Hannibal slid his eyes to Will, who simply shrugged with a smile, then reached with his unpainted hand to sip tea from the side table.

"I'll trust you both in the assumption that it's hilarious. It's wonderful to see you getting along."

Will and Mischa glanced at one another for the first real time that day, and their giggles grew vaguely awkward. Will scratched his nape and Mischa blushed.

She admitted, "That was fun. You're a good sport, Will."

"Ah, thanks."

Hannibal took the polish and settled back to paint his other hand, wearing a small smile of his own. "There's breakfast in the fridge and oven keeping fresh, Will. Might you retrieve it and come back to us?"

"Oh, yeah. Of course."

Will hurried to collect plates of perfect French toast, cups of tea, and small bowls of fruit and homemade yogurt. He balanced all five on a tray and called up the stairs for Abigail and Emmaline. When he returned to the living room, Hannibal sat up straight and offered an appreciative smile that warmed Will to his core.

They ate in bizarrely cozy silence for several minutes. Hannibal kept catching Will's eye and smiling lightly, twining their ankles together and summoning fresh memories of their bed.

Abigail ventured into the room, wringing her fingers with tense shoulders.

Hannibal grinned. “Good morning, my dear. Help yourself to whatever you’d like.”

She seemed to relax a bit, scanning the delicious breakfast spread. “Thank you.”

“Where’s Emmaline?” Mischa insisted.

Abigail bristled but hid it well. “Upstairs. She’s stuck at the top again.”

“Oh… alright.”

Abigail arched her brow. “You don’t seem all that worried, Mischa. After your fit this morning, I thought you wouldn’t let her out of your sight.”

Hannibal pursed his lips. “Abigail, shall we lay the issue to rest?”

Mischa set down her plate just a bit too quickly. “I’ll go check on her.”

She left and Abigail flopped into an armchair with a huff. The grandfather clock nearby marked each second with a soothing click, and Will tracked its heavy pendulum moving.

Abigail said, “I’m sorry, Hannibal, but she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Will countered gently. “Mischa is well-acquainted with distrust and anxiety. She’s a cheerful person who puts on a good face and pushes through, but she’d be really easy to break.”

Hannibal lowered a teacup from his mouth. “I will not let that happen.”

“Emmaline thinks Mischa doesn’t pay close attention to her,” Abigail mused. “It’s like they’re coexisting and Mischa thinks everything is fine, but all Emmaline wants is a real connection. It’s like Mischa doesn’t know any better. Hannibal, why are they like that?”

He donned his psychiatrist tone and began, “Survivors of trauma are often isolated by…”

Will levelled him with a pointed stare. “Did you push Mischa down the stairs that day? Jealous that a child would direct her attention away from you?”

Hannibal’s eyes widened in horror. “Of course not.”

Abigail added, “She told me why she left America with Emmaline. You… can be a bit overbearing.”

Hannibal’s lips pursed. Will studied him and workshopped his ongoing theory until it clicked with a wave of anger. He felt his expression darken and Hannibal shifted uncomfortably.

Without taking his eyes off his partner, Will said, “Abigail, could you give us a few minutes, please?”

She tilted her chin up. “No.”

Will raised a brow.

She added, “I deserve to know what’s going on in this family, don’t you think?”

A moment passed, and Will enjoyed the pang of fatherly pride he never thought he’d get to have. “Yes, you do.”

Hannibal cleared his throat. “And what would you like to discuss, Will?”

“You’ve been fostering dependency in Mischa,” Will said.

Hannibal’s mouth opened, but Will didn’t let him speak.

“Let me finish. When Emmaline was born, you were terrified that Mischa would love her more than you, and you’d be left behind. You let Emmaline live so Mischa would continue to feel like she owed you, then… You mentioned she was on painkillers for a while? What did you whisper in her ears? Mischa never bonded with the baby, and she never learned how to process her emotions. She knows something is wrong in her relationship with Emmaline, but she’ll never let herself believe you’re manipulating her. I don’t think she even understands what you’re capable of, does she, Hannibal?”

Hannibal closed his eyes and sighed. “Will…”

“You love so intensely, you’re so terrified to lose her, and you feel so unlovable that you think you have to manipulate people into staying with you.”

Hannibal looked resigned, now, a distinct and vulnerable disquiet flickering over his face. He sat waiting for what he knew would come next.

Will met his eyes. “You saw how well it worked with Mischa, so you did the same thing to me. You saved Abigail to bind us together and make me want to lean on you.”

Across the room, Abigail tensed up and her chin quivered. She looked between Hannibal and Will in search of the truth she had long since known. Eventually, her stare settled on Hannibal, and Will’s heart coiled up in his chest.

Abigail whispered, “I’m just another Emmaline. All you wanted was Will.”

Hannibal pursed his lips.

Abigail took a deep breath. “If he’d abandoned you for Crawford and the FBI… would you have killed me?”

Will watched him carefully, and Hannibal knew better than to lie.

“Yes. Had I considered it necessary.”

Abigail forcefully fended off tears.

Will leaned back on the couch, dragged a hand down his face, and sighed, “Abigail… it’s really best if you go upstairs now…”

She sniffled and stood with as much dignity as she could muster. Without a word, she turned on her heel and fled the room.

Eventually, Will stood up and began to pace with his hands in his pockets. “I can’t say I’m surprised, Hannibal. No one can force you to be something you’re not or feel things you don’t feel. I understand that.”

The air punched out of his lungs when he found silent tears streaming down Hannibal’s face. He sat stiff and heavy with dread, excessively prim like he’d been in Baltimore. He looked up through his lashes like a kicked puppy. Will sighed.

“You are such a bastard,” he thought out loud, brimming with begrudging fondness .

Hannibal swallowed. “Are you going to leave me?”

“Only if you hurt her now.”

“I would not. I swear it. She’s ours, Will. I care very much for her well-being, and I look forward to meeting the young woman she becomes.”

“Good.”

Hannibal flexed his fists open and closed where they rested on his knees. Eventually, he confessed, “I am frightened. I have been for a long time. For most of my life, Mischa was all I had. Desperate measures were all I knew. Are you disappointed in me?”

Will snorted. “Evidently, I can forgive your toxic manipulation. I think you know I’m not your sister’s biggest fan, but I’ve put in an effort this week. For you.”

“That’s all I can ask, and it means the world to me, Will.”

With a closed-lip smile, Will ventured back to kneel at Hannibal’s feet, then cupped his jaw in one tender hand and stroked his thumb over a cheekbone. The small action seemed to calm both of them. By now, Will was comfortable admitting that he loved this man because of all the horror, not in spite of it.

“Hannibal… love isn’t about owing and repaying. It’s unconditional. Mischa never would have pushed you aside, and neither will I.”

“There are people who would say I don’t deserve love after all I’ve done.”

“You said it yourself: you made you and you are who you are. *But*... I think part of it all has been to mould yourself into the only thing you thought you could be.”

Hannibal’s lip began to tremble. “Unlovable?”

Will surged up to kiss him, pressing close to straddle his hips and fold him into an embrace. Hannibal melted into it, clutching Will’s sides and keeping it slow much like he had just hours before. With a low, broken groan, Will pulled fistfuls of Hannibal’s hair so his head

jerked back and left him panting, then covered his mouth in his again with a ferocity he hadn't known he possessed.

"I'm fucking obsessed with you, Hannibal. If you're unlovable, then so am I."

"Oh, Will… Will, I adore you. You are anything but."

More full, languid kisses coaxed shaky little gasps from reddened lips. Barely audible over their breath, Will whispered, "Well, there you go."

Hannibal's tears came in a steady stream now, marking his face and blurring his eyes but never making a sound. He buried his face in Will's shoulder, soaking his shirt collar and collapsing. Will held him up, gently but firmly rubbing his back and murmuring soft encouragements until the bout of grief and passion was spent. It broke Will's heart, wrenching his empathy in new, personal directions that he hadn't dusted off in years.

Eventually, Hannibal leaned back and dabbed his eyes with a tissue, avoiding Will's own and swallowing thickly. Will knew he needed some space, so after a final peck on the lips he stood up with a satisfied blush.

"I should go check on Abigail."

Hannibal nodded, and with a wry smile Will slipped out of the room. Abigail didn't look at him when he sauntered in and knocked on her door frame. Instead, she just kept her eyes shut, hands tangled in her hair where she flopped on her bed.

"What's so wrong with me?" she muttered. Her voice cracked and her nose was stuffy. "Why am I not enough for him? I was too much for my dad and I'm not enough for Hannibal. What's wrong with me? And don't say nothing, because if that were true I'd be in college and you'd be in prison."

Will sighed and sat on the edge of the bed beside her. "Nothing is wrong with you… but you're right."

"I draw freaks."

"You don't draw freaks, Abigail. You feel most at home among people with freaks on our backs."

She sat up, absently ripping her fingernails. A moment passed in silence, then she said, "So, I have a freak on my back, too?"

Will offered that quirked, contemplative smile. "Everyone does. We just have a bad habit of listening to ours. In plain English, we like weird shit and don't see the point in pretending otherwise. Sticking together makes us feel less alone, and Hannibal wants that too."

"But he doesn't love me."

"He and I both want you to learn that how other people feel about you doesn't define your worth. You're not going to live your life according to his whims, no matter how tempting it

is. You deserve better."

Abigail's brow furrowed. "But… *you* seem pretty happy to do that. You love each other. You just said there's no point in pretending."

Will shook his head. "We don't control each other. Neither of us would allow that. We're learning how to coexist because we can't live without each other, and that's not healthy. You're going to build your own future where we aren't holding you back."

"Because he doesn't love me and it makes me feel used," Abigail sniped.

He turned to face her fully, gentle and awkward but adamant all the same. "You don't want his love, Abigail. It's dangerous."

"Then why do *you* ?"

"For one, you and I are talking about two completely different kinds of love. He can't bring himself to love you like a proper daughter because he's already caught up in so much fear about Mischa. That's not your fault. Do you hear me?"

He took one of her hands and squeezed, simultaneously grounding Abigail and trapping her in a free fall. She nodded, but she didn't quite believe it.

Will held her eyes and repeated, " *Nothing* about Hannibal Lecter or Garret Jacob Hobbs is your fault. Don't define yourself by them. Hannibal does want what's best for you, and the best thing for you is to use us to get to Europe and then build your own life."

Abigail considered this for a long moment. He was offering everything she'd ever wanted, but it wouldn't quite lock into place in her mind.

"I'd miss you guys," she blurted.

Will's face pinkened and he patted her shoulder. "I do hope you'd come and visit."

Now she allowed herself a flickering smile. "Thanks for… I guess, having faith in me?"

He smiled back. "You deserve it."

When his gaze drifted to a spot behind her, she knew Hannibal had appeared in the doorway and she turned to face him. He looked hesitant for once in his life.

With a fond, exasperated eye roll, Abigail jerked her chin and said, "Get over here."

He strode across the room and sat on her other side, then folded her in his arms and tugged Will into a group hug by his sleeve. Hannibal's soft breath of contentment ruffled the hair by her missing ear, and he did that cat-like nuzzling thing with his head. Abigail laughed quietly and leaned into their warm, grounding presence. For the first time in years, she exhaled and felt the hypervigilance and anxiety float away with it. They were always going to be with her. She could take on the world for herself and they'd have her back. It shocked her to realize

that she'd never felt this way before. They may not know how to call it love, but their little family had found each other and were better for it.

After a few minutes, Hannibal and Will pulled away, the former smoothing a hand over Abigail's hair while the latter studied them both fondly.

Will ventured, "I thought we could go ice skating today."

Abigail brightened and stood up, facing them. "Sure! That sounds fun."

Hannibal smiled back. "Alright."

They all moved to leave the room, but once Abigail was downstairs Hannibal turned around and approached her bedroom closet.

"What are you doing?" Will raised a brow, hovering at his back.

Hannibal didn't reply, instead opening the double doors to reveal Emmaline. She was hugging her knees on the floor, not breathing until a squeaky hiccup escaped her. Will genuinely did not know how to respond to this.

Hannibal studied her indifferently, eventually beckoning her to stand. "Eavesdropping is rather rude, Emmaline."

Her eyes widened, but she gave a derisive snort. "Will did it and you didn't care."

"Hm, yes. Well, Will is Will and you are you. Up you get. Closets are terrible places to be."

With a martyred sigh, Emmaline complied, dusted off her pants, and crossed her arms while Hannibal shut the doors. Then he turned back to face her expectantly.

She closed her eyes and sighed, compulsively jerking her head to the side several times. "I was… okay, fine, I was snooping around, then Abigail came in so I hid. I didn't think you'd be having some kind of moment."

Hannibal's unnervingly blank expression didn't change. "I see. And what are you expecting in the night when you hide in Will and I's room instead?"

Will and Emmaline both froze at that, followed by Will clenching his fists as he shot Hannibal a pointed look. "Excuse me, *what?* "

Hannibal returned the look, imploring him to be patient.

"Let's all step into the hall," he said. "Abigail may return at any moment."

Once they were standing in the hall with the door closed behind them, Will was seething. What gave this girl the nerve…

She saw how they were watching her and flinched. "I'm sorry, okay? I wasn't listening to you guys kiss or anything. Gross. Just sleeping."

Hannibal and Will waited until she realized they wouldn't let her off the hook. She looked almost exclusively at Hannibal.

"I was trying to make you seem more… human," she admitted. "My life revolves around you whether I like it or not. My mom's never going to get over you, and I know that changed how she raised me. I might as well try to understand you. You aren't as… everything when you're asleep."

Hannibal's mouth quirked. "You must have snuck out in the night when you knew we wouldn't wake. How did you calculate the risk?"

She looked at the floor and mumbled, "Melatonin smells like almond and honey."

"Surely you knew that I knew you were there."

"Why did you let me stay?"

Hannibal glanced aside and pushed his lips out in thought. "I wish that my aunt and uncle had been more honest with me in many respects. There's a certain poetry to my youth and yours that I rather like. While I feared connection, you feared the lack of it; now I dread the lack of it and you berate your curiosity about me."

Her chin quivered. "I'm not a monster."

"You are keen, Emmaline. Perhaps you should consider yourself lucky that you only got the best of our family traits. Tell me, why did you threaten to push Abigail down the stairs?"

Emmaline shuffled on her feet and wouldn't raise her eyes. "Looking for thrills to get me out of my head. I… I suspected she might push me back. Real danger is less daunting than what my mind throws at me."

"The next time you have an impulse to raise a certain amount of hell, Emmaline, you should follow through with it. I know you would not act on your specific intrusive thoughts, but a bit of impulsivity elsewhere can do one good. You may find it cathartic, even if only once. Take a bit of that power back and grasp your life by its horns."

Emmaline's brow furrowed, but fright lurked in her eyes. "I don't trust you."

Slow and soft with approval, Hannibal said, "Good."

With that, he beckoned for Will to follow him, and Will took his arm without looking back. They met Abigail in the front room and dressed for an afternoon of ice skating.

The frozen creek by their property was long enough to serve as the perfect skating trail, about nine feet wide on average. A gentle breeze stained their cheeks pink, partially sheltered from the sun by overhanging branches covered in snow. Thick ice whistled and murmured beneath their blades, and Abigail bolted out ahead of them with a smile, seasoned in the sport by her time in Minnesota. Will's father had dragged him to hockey practice for a while in middle school, so it came back to him and he wound around the bends on nimble legs. It didn't take long for him to notice something off, though, turning to find Hannibal clutching a tree branch

several yards behind. Will grinned and went back to meet him, shooting a conspiratorial look at Abigail.

“We finally found something Hannibal Lecter isn’t good at.”

With a haughty tilt of his chin, he replied, “You’re certain the ice is thick enough to support the three of us?”

Will snickered. “Yeah. Want to hold my hand?”

Hannibal’s fingers flexed in his black gloves, but his tone changed to one of gentle reverence. It was the closest thing he got to being shy. “Yes, I do.”

Blushing but unable to hold back a grin, Will extended a mittened hand for his lover’s warm, solid grip. Abigail skated off to do clumsy jumps and spins while hollering in delight. Will breathed deeply and simply *was* , just a family out in the world.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

TW: suicidal ideation

I also just want to clarify that Emmaline was never in the room when Hannibal and Will had sex. That would be gross and Hannibal would never have allowed it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emmaline had slept nine collective hours in bouts of three since setting foot in this house. Sleep deprivation made her a bit giddy, anxiety swirling up beneath her ribs and oozing from between them like glue sitting viscous on her diaphragm. *Mamma Mia* still played blue, white, and sore on the backs of her sticky eyelids, choruses repeating in her head as she curled up in Hannibal's closet or slouched at dinner. The gleeful show tunes stuffed up just enough space in her mind that nothing else could fit, at least as long as she didn't let the music stop.

She didn't smile lest her teeth fall out. If she took the steps, she'd disintegrate. She laid awake lest the roof cave in when she was powerless to escape.

He must have been giving her needles so she wouldn't sleep. Wouldn't she remember the needles? She didn't remember any needles… but that didn't matter. Just look at what he'd done to Will Graham and Abigail Hobbs. Mum had spent years convincing Emmaline that her fear was irrational, hiding the monster right in front of them all along. No one could be trusted now. Emmaline feared manifestations of her fears, and that's exactly what Hannibal Lecter was. He'd torn her foundations, walls, and defences apart, leaving nothing but a barren shell that quivered in the breeze. Any sword she wielded would pass right through him, ghostly and ignored. Her mother was long gone, cast into the abyss he called Love.

Lying stiff on the guest room carpet and counting daubs of plaster on the ceiling, Emmaline let hot tears leak into her hairline. Mischa showed up with a light little knock and suggested they go for a drive, just the two of them while the others were out. Emmaline shook her head and turned it away until her mom disappeared. Mischa was an unreliable, inconsiderate liar just like her brother. Even if that closet did crumble around Emmaline one night, at least she'd be taking the stupid suits and lies with her.

How could Abigail Hobbs want to live like this? Emmaline had spent her whole life dreading the time when everything would come to the surface, but Will, Hannibal, and Abigail went on about how beautiful it was to be *seen* for the dangerous things they were. It made no sense to her. It was to be seen that marked the end of Emmaline, everything she worked so hard to hide was now bared on display for Hannibal and Will to lick clean from her skull. No one

deserved to live like that, so when she'd wistfully considered pushing her cousin down the stairs, it wasn't callous or compulsive; it was a desperate last attempt at heroism.

See, the truth was… Emmaline Lecter was a monster. The things in her mind did not belong on public streets or in schools or at parties. Every news story she catalogued could be a crime of her own, even if she didn't remember doing it. Before, she'd been able to convince herself that was impossible, she'd remember, she would know. There was no evidence but that which her mind supplied, following a bread-crumb trail into increasingly far-fetched depths. Sometimes she swore she remembered doing it.

Now… now that she knew what ran in her blood… it all made more sense than usual. Her efforts to be good were futile. Emmaline was doomed to become like her uncle, and no amount of hand tapping or ruminating would stop it.

Despite everything, she'd grinned at him when he probably let her win at fencing. She clung to the image of him as some divine saviour because, yes, Emmaline was a monster… but at least now she finally knew why. If it was possible for Hannibal to be loved and accepted as he was, then maybe Emmaline could be too.

But that didn't matter.

He only wanted her dead, and all she could think to do… was take control of her fear.

. . .

As the sun began to set and spill blue across the evening, Abigail removed her winter gear and hung it up carefully in the mudroom, laughing at the stories Hannibal told of his childhood. He claimed that he used to be good at ice skating, but when Abigail threatened to fact-check that with Mischa, he turned pink even beneath the cold-bitten flush already there.

As if summoned, Mischa flounced in and patted Hannibal's cheek with the back of her hand. He allowed it, eyes smiling fondly.

"You're freezing," she fussed. "You stayed out too long. For god's sake, don't *do* that to me!"

He took her hand in both of his and gently kissed it. "I'm sorry we worried you. Shall I make it up to you with hot chocolate and scones?"

"Already done," she grinned. "I also made your birthday cake, and you are forbidden to see it until the morning. Will, if you don't keep him out of the fridge, I'll put you in it."

"What about dinner?" Hannibal sighed.

"Have Will fetch ingredients for you as you go."

Hannibal just grinned back and followed her into the kitchen. Will and Abigail exchanged a look before following in turn, and they enjoyed warm cocoa with caramel and whipped cream. Abigail took a deep breath of its rich scent and let herself melt into it, marshmallow quivering in thick swirls on its surface. It almost felt as if she hadn't attempted murder this

morning. She reflected on how casually Mischa made a cannibalism joke, but it came to her much less naturally; she'd said it because Hannibal would find it funny, not because she did.

Dinner passed uneventfully after Will helped Hannibal cook, and Abigail made fake gagging noises whenever the two would fleetingly touch, kiss, or nuzzle each other as they worked in sync. She passed the time by turning her plans for Europe over in her head. For the first time in her life, the future seemed vast and starlit.

In the evening, much to Abigail's surprise, Emmaline found her where she sat in a window seat, a deck of cards absently shuffling in her hands. The heavy rolling of winter clouds made streaks of golden sunset look sickly over the lake, which frothed nearly green in anticipation. Emmaline dropped into the seat across from her.

"I forgive you," she announced. "This morning was stupid. I'm sorry."

"You knew I'd push you."

"You tried everything you possibly could to survive. I've ended up both jealous and remarkably understanding of you. Every time you prod my boundaries, I just bounce right back into your orbit. My self-respect is shot. How do you stand it?"

"Stand… what?"

Emmaline leaned in, eyes wild as the wind began to pick up outside. "Being seen. Seen and completely accepted for what you are. Having all the worst sludge inside you peeled back and oozed all over the pretty hardwood floors. How do Hannibal and Will manage to make it all look so easy?"

"Your mom doesn't want you spending time with me."

"I don't care what my mom thinks," Emmaline snapped. "How do you do it? If you aren't relying on Hannibal and Will to make you feel worthwhile, then how do you just accept yourself when you know you're a monster?"

Abigail blinked, confused upon hearing the insight she had not yet shared with the other girl. "Emmaline, why do you think you're a monster?"

"I can't tell you! You'll just run right to Hannibal and he'll make me do it."

"Do what?"

"All of it! He said he wouldn't but what's that worth? He said he wouldn't kill people when he became a doctor, and look how that turned out. Just answer the question. *Please* ."

With a long sigh, Abigail obliged. "I decided that I wanted to live. That's the only way I've figured out."

Limp and deflated, Emmaline looked awful. Her once keen eyes drowned in the vast shadows beneath them. When she spoke, it was in a broken whisper.

“So there’s really no hope for me, then.”

A long moment passed and it began to snow rather violently. The once eager breeze now pressed on the house with shouts that broke like thunder. In the static pocket of time when Abigail met her eyes, she realized what Emmaline meant just a second too late. Emmaline stood up to bolt from the room and Abigail scrambled after her, sending the playing cards flying in a scattered pile.

“Emmaline!” she shrieked.

The other girl made a break for the front door, digging in pockets for her mom’s car keys without even donning a coat.

“Emmaline!”

“Leave me alone!”

Frantic, Abigail grabbed her arm as Emmaline banged the door open, and the raging winter storm pounced in to sniff around.

“Let me go!”

“Emmaline, this is what Hannibal *wants* . What did he say to you? Emmaline, he’s manipulating you.”

Emmaline scoffed, hair a wreck in the wind. “Do you really think I’m stupid enough to fall for that?”

“You’re not stupid,” Abigail pleaded. “You’re not stupid, you’re just not Hannibal Lecter. Emmaline, *please* ! He wants you dead and Mischa can’t blame him if you do it yourself.”

Emmaline blinked at her, seething. “I’m in control,” she spat, though she didn’t sound quite like she believed it. “Not him.”

With a quick, desperate whirl, she wrenched her arm back and kicked Abigail in the knee. Abigail doubled over and bruised her shins on the ground, as snowflakes speckled it with curious licks. Grunting with the brief shock of pain, she gulped in lungfuls of panic.

“Emmaline, please!”

“I have to get out of here!” came the fading reply. She vanished into the blizzard, and Abigail saw eight ghosts.

“Mischa!” she screamed up the stairs. “Mischa!”

She wouldn’t be heard over the howling wind.

What she did see was Hannibal leaning on a nearby doorframe, draped in shadow and out of sight. Abigail met his eyes with a burning glare, baring her teeth as her rage only seemed to make him spark with pride. Will hurried up close behind him, scanning the scene.

“Abigail…” he began, but she just shoved on her coat and boots and fled into the night.

Will called after her, and Hannibal’s murmured consoling echoed the footsteps of a shadow in the winter woods. Both voices faded behind Abigail as she crumpled into her car and slammed on the gas, following Emmaline’s tail lights. The driveway was long enough and the snow fresh enough that she only met a bit of resistance.

Her wipers beat at the onslaught of cold, which bit at Abigail’s bare hands and ears. She followed Emmaline down the persistent, empty country road that flanked their property. It bisected shrivelled vineyards that awaited the spring, and the black lake gnawed the shoreline just out of sight. Despite moving well over the speed limit to keep up with Emmaline, Abigail felt she was fighting through water where only her toes touched the sand.

It happened in a moment.

Oncoming headlights swerved and their brakes shrieked, coupled with Abigail and Emmaline’s to provoke a terrified cacophony. To Abigail’s left, the unknown car hit a patch of black ice, tripped over a ditch, and flipped twice before pinwheeling into a vineyard. Ahead of her, Emmaline wasn’t much better off. Abigail barely managed to abuse her own brakes in time to swing into the other lane, but she skidded to a halt unscathed.

Barely taking a moment to breathe, she flung herself outside towards Emmaline’s car. Tripping through ankle-deep slush at the side of the road, she yanked the door open to find Emmaline in a motionless heap. A smear of blood painted her temple as well as the airbag.

“ *Shit* ,” Abigail sobbed, squeezing her eyes shut and shoving the door past its limits in her fury. Eventually, she crumpled into a ball in the bike lane. “Shit.”

Her phone was at the house. Emmaline didn’t wake, and it might have been a few minutes or an hour later when more headlights pulled up behind her. She nearly slipped as she stood, squinting through a pounding headache and looking like a fledgling zombie.

Mischa scrambled out of the back, followed by steadfast Will and nonchalant Hannibal from the front seats.

“Abigail!” Will called, assessing the scene as she ran to him and burrowed into his chest.

All she let out was a choked, defeated hiccup.

. . .

Once Will had Abigail safely in his arms, he turned his attention to the rest of the scene.

Mischa was screaming and dashing for the rental car. “What happened to Emmaline?”

Hannibal followed close behind her despite barely breaking stride, and with a solid, gentle hand on her shoulder he persuaded her to step back and let him look. He had donned his efficient, doctorly manner, but Will could sense his lover’s satisfaction with how the night was unfolding.

Hannibal crouched by Emmaline's side, and without moving her he checked her vitals and assessed her injuries. Finally, he announced, "She's alright," and Mischa broke down sobbing.

Furiously, she whirled to glare at Abigail and shrieked. "What *happened* !"

Abigail trembled violently and shook her head just as much so. "I-It wasn't my fault."

Will held her tighter, rubbing her back and levying a glare over her shoulder at Mischa. "Leave her alone. Maybe if you paid better attention to your daughter–"

"Enough," Hannibal looked from her to Will and back again.

They both obeyed and watched as he strode to investigate the other car: the one that lay in a heap of scrap metal across the road. Inside were a middle aged man and woman, both silhouettes clearly unconscious and misshapen. With a quick assessment, Hannibal dismissed the man in the passenger seat and rounded to see the driver. Curiosity settled on his shoulders, revealing itself in the tilt of his head.

"This one's alive."

Will watched the woman blink blearily and loll her head in shock, and Hannibal studied her with careful consideration. Their conversation from earlier today resurfaced in Will's subconscious, about love being unconditional. He knew what Hannibal intended a few moments before he did it. Hannibal took a chance and lifted the veil for only a moment, but it was enough.

He reached into the car, grasped the woman's fragile neck, and wrenched the life from her with a wretched *crunch* . Abigail startled with a little breath, but Will simply watched. It was necessary; they couldn't risk her identifying them, even in her addled state.

With snow whirling around them and biting at their faces, Hannibal looked up to see Mischa cowered back against the rental car. She stared at him like a stranger, mouth agape with a trembling jaw, and abject horror flooded her eyes as the watertight compartments in her mind buckled at their rivets. Having never seen her brother kill, she could store it neatly away in the realm of bad dreams, but now her world snapped back into definition and she turned away, hunched against the roof with a hand muffling her long, slow sobs. Her shoulders heaved and her hair didn't hide her turmoil.

Hannibal watched her with a quiet, neutral expression, and Will only saw his heartbreak for a moment before it shuttered back down. Will's own heart broke for his fragile monster tucked away beneath the mask. Will and Abigail would have to do some damage control, but in the meantime there was more obvious work to be done.

He took the reins. "We need to get out of here before anyone else drives by. Mischa, we take Emmaline and Abigail back to the house."

Abigail's eyes were wide with anxiety, darting about the scene. "What about the bodies?"

“Hannibal and I will take care of it,” he soothed.

She gnawed her lip and hugged her middle. “Can I go with you? I don’t want to be alone with them.”

After a moment of consideration, Will agreed. Hannibal gathered Emmaline into his car, then enlisted Will to help move the bodies into the trunk of Abigail’s. Will opened the strangers’ passenger door and a high, frightened whimpering emerged from the back seat. Carefully, he peeked in and huffed a sympathetic laugh.

“Hannibal–”

“Absolutely not.”

“Hannibal, it’s terrified. I need to see if it’s hurt. Hey, buddy.”

A brown labrador dog cowered in the back, and Will gently crooned to it and offered his hand for it to sniff. He discovered its name was Lucas. While Hannibal took care of the bodies, Will coaxed Lucas out of the car and carried him back to Abigail’s.

Hannibal took the organs he wanted from the bodies, but his usual glee and rapture were absent from the act. By the time they towed the wrecked cars away and disposed of them in the lake, it was well past midnight. The blizzard had begun to clear, but still no one was around.

Mischa settled a groggy Emmaline into her bed, Will helped the miraculously unharmed dog get settled in, and Abigail sat at the kitchen counter with a long-since cooled cup of coffee.

The sun rose on Hannibal’s birthday and he spent it cooking. Mischa and Emmaline did not emerge from their rooms and he did not make them until dinner.

. . .

Hannibal swept into the dining room balancing plates of food on his arms, elaborate as always, though he did not announce it like he usually enjoyed. He lightly set them down before Emmaline and Mischa, then Abigail, Will, and himself. Emmaline sat rigid in her seat as if to stay as far from the plate as possible, and her mouth opened and closed though nothing emerged.

Mischa lightly cleared her throat. “Ah, Hannibal? Emmaline and I don’t eat meat, remember?”

Will hid a grin in his wine glass and shared a look with Abigail, who was rather pale and antsy herself. Hannibal never forgot anything. He studied his sister carefully, neutral and waiting. Will and Abigail watched in the corners of their eyes as Mischa and Emmaline squirmed, but no one moved to take the first bite.

“Han…” Mischa took a deep breath and tried to appease him. “I appreciate all the effort you’ve gone to. I always do, but I’d really prefer…”

“Is it people?” Emmaline blurted, watching him just as expectantly.

Hannibal finally broke eye contact, then organized a tidy bite before slipping it between his lips. Once he swallowed, he replied, “We don’t waste food in this household. Especially not after all the trouble you went to providing it for us, Emmaline.”

Her stare dropped back to her plate. Every inch of her was trembling, paralyzed, and Will almost bothered to feel sorry for her. As it was, he wanted to see what Hannibal had planned. Emmaline and Mischa looked like caught mice beneath his gaze. Another moment passed and nobody moved.

Hannibal prompted, “Eat up, then. It’s no worse than anything you’ve already done.”

Mischa sucked in a choked sob, and Will could see her tumbling back to that night so long ago, half-conscious and parting her lips for the scraps of meat her brother offered.

Emmaline’s eyes widened as the sharp seed of false certainty planted in her mind sprouted leaves. Hannibal reached in and scritched the creature burrowed there, offering it tasty little incentives to come out and play.

The trembling girl shook her head. “I didn’t do any of those things I think I did. I’d never hurt anyone!”

Hannibal raised a brow. “You killed two people just last night. Crushed them, even. You thought about killing Abigail.”

Mischa turned to him with a harsh glare. “ *You* killed the woman.”

“She would not have survived the night. I ended her suffering.”

“You didn’t even *try* to help!”

“It’s possible for trauma to cull one’s memories,” Hannibal said drily. “It’s likely Emmaline has been misleading us all without realizing.” He turned to face the girl. “As a doctor, I’m beginning to doubt your condition.”

Emmaline jerked her head to the side in an unclear pattern, and her breath was coming faster. “Y-You mean it might not be OCD at all? Something could really be wrong with me? No! No… You’re a *liar* .”

Will sipped his wine. It really took nothing at all for Hannibal to terrify the poor thing. Obsessions latched onto anything that fed her darkest dreads and fears no matter how much she managed to rationalize. He barely even had to manipulate her; her brain would just torture itself. No wonder Hannibal had long since grown bored.

“You learned from the best, it seems,” he sighed. “Only one like me could deceive me. I’m very disappointed. I thought we were building a pleasant rapport.”

“Your crazy daughter was chasing her in the car!” Mischa hissed.

Abigail retorted, “Emmaline took off on her own! I was trying to make sure she didn't kill herself! I called for you to help and you didn’t show up. Sounds like you never show up, Mischa. You have no idea what’s going on in her head because you only pay attention to Hannibal. It looks like you don’t care about Emmaline at all, like you don’t know *how* . Can’t you see what he’s done to you?”

When Abigail finished, she snapped her mouth shut and hunched her shoulders, regret billowing off her like smoke. She likely hadn’t meant to reveal Hannibal’s manipulation to Mischa. He already felt betrayed and rejected, and Will saw his jaw tighten. Hannibal looked cooly between them all and took another bite of his meal.

Will could sense the fabric of this fucked up family unravelling, and he again considered methods of damage control. That was all he’d be able to do at this point. Mischa was beginning to put things together, and Emmaline was a mess of terrified sobs as she tapped her hands and jerked her head to no avail.

Mischa forced herself to meet Hannibal’s eyes and cowered at what she found. She searched for the boy who once sketched mermaids for her, but in his place sat a shadowed, antlered, broken-hearted thing she didn’t recognize. This was what he’d been all along. Tears streamed down her face, and ever so slowly, she raised her fork to her lips and did what he asked. She swallowed the small bit of meat without chewing or tasting it, but Hannibal seemed vaguely satisfied as he lowered his eyes again.

Emmaline cried, “I won’t! I won’t do it!”

The room was silent but for her sobs, until Mischa finally spoke in a shaky whisper.

“Is Abigail right?” she asked, glancing frantically around the table. “Am I a bad mom?”

All eyes went to Emmaline, who scowled and absently pulled out strands of her own hair. Her cries broke into pitiful hiccups and she slurred, “You never listen to me! It’s all about *him. All the time.* When I have panic attacks you run up to your room and hide, but once *he* had to run around to avoid getting *arrested* , you were at his beck and call! The only time you seem to function is when he’s around. You won’t take me to see a doctor, you never thought to tell me my uncle was a killer, and you let me find out in front of my entire school who looked at me like I was a monster! Do you know how terrifying that was? When I’m already scared of being misunderstood *all the time* ? No, Mum, I can’t say you’ve done a perfect job. I can’t take another *second* in this family!”

Her voice grew more frantic and shrill until her voice cracked and she went silent.

Mischa’s lip wobbled and she croaked, “You have no idea what I’ve been through. I didn’t know how to help you. Hannibal told me…”

“Anything Hannibal told you is only for his own gain, Mum. You’re wrapped around his little finger and it’s made you fucking stupid. He didn’t want you to have anyone in your life that wasn’t him. He deliberately pulled you away from me. I *needed* you and you’ve never been here. At least not emotionally.”

“I tried, Emmaline!” Mischa sobbed. “That’s why I moved back to France…”

“Well, it wasn’t enough.”

Will observed this exchange with an overpowering urge for it to be over. He was tempted to remind them both that this was in fact all Hannibal’s fault, but he’d chosen Hannibal’s side and he would stick to it. Abigail hunched in her seat as if she wanted to disappear, likely recalling how Hobbs got her to do his bidding.

Finally, Mischa turned to Hannibal with broken eyes, and his own were glittering so he wouldn’t look at her.

“Is that true?” she whispered. “Did you try to keep us apart?”

“Mischa…”

“Don’t lie to me!”

Hannibal glanced at Will, who squeezed his knee under the table. Finally, Hannibal sighed, “I’ve succeeded.”

Mischa deflated, her anxiously squared shoulders dropping and her lashes fluttering while she wiped her eyes. Instead of dissolving into more panic, she steeled herself and spat, “You’re a monster.”

Will felt the blow that made Hannibal wilt in turn, his mouth opening with no sound, grief outpouring from his swamped, tangled heart. When he finally spoke, it was soft, broken and seeking.

“Mischa, I couldn’t lose you.”

“I never would have stopped loving you because I had a kid! I can love more than one member of my *family* , Hannibal. You’re so insecure. Why didn’t you *talk* to me?”

He considered that as his brow furrowed, but he didn’t seem to come up with an answer.

Will sighed. “Hannibal’s emotions… work in extremes.”

Mischa laughed, mirthless. “Yes, I know, thank you.”

“I think he was afraid of ever being alone. Having someone’s attention whenever he wants it is a security blanket. Emmaline divided your attention.”

“Well, it didn’t work out for him the first time! I left because I couldn’t take another minute of his hovering and clinging. I need my own life, Hannibal. I’m an adult. You’re supposed to be there for me as much as I’m there for you.”

“I have been,” Hannibal replied. “I nearly died for you, I killed for you, and I would have dropped everything at any point from there on out had you called, but you refused.”

“Is this all some kind of punishment?”

Hannibal looked small. “I did it because I love you.”

Mischa just stared at him, uncomprehending and disgusted. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t try to control me. I don’t think you *can* love.”

He was out of his seat in a second, and Emmaline was screaming with his knife hovering over her throat. He stared calmly at Mischa, but underneath raged a storm of fear and hurt.

“Hannibal, don’t!” Abigail pleaded.

Mischa stood up and nearly knocked over her chair, a wavering gun pointed at her brother’s head across the table. Hannibal looked disappointed, and Mischa’s tears stretched into helpless wails when Will leapt from his own seat in pure rage to complete the picture. With his knife at her neck, her tears stretched into helpless wails.

“Put it down, Mischa,” Will ordered.

She continued to sob, “Let her go, just let her go…”

Hannibal processed this new development, and his eyes settled on Will. The world narrowed to just the two of them, and Will tried to project as much soothing energy as he could. His eyes fixed on his lover in turn, who now only saw him as a threat.

Hannibal was visibly fighting back his fear. “Will, if you hurt her…”

“I’d rather have you grieving than dead, Hannibal.”

“Are you sure?”

“You and Mischa can still work this out, but not if you kill Emmaline.”

He felt Mischa’s throat flex and bob, indicating that she doubted it, but she was smart enough to keep quiet. She didn’t lower the gun, though her arms were shaking. Shadows played on Hannibal’s face, making him look otherworldly.

“Will, if you let her go, you might lose me. If you kill her, I can guarantee it.”

Will took a deep breath. “Let’s both let them go at the same time, okay? I know you’re hurt, but lashing out is only going to hurt you more. All I care about is seeing you safe, okay?”

A long moment passed, full of Emmaline’s whimpering, until Hannibal and Will finally reached a silent agreement. Mischa and Emmaline stumbled out of their holds, and Emmaline bolted from the room without a second glance. Mischa lingered behind, her lip trembling and curled with vitriol around a long, shuddering breath.

“You have twelve hours,” she announced. “Then I’m calling Jack Crawford. I never want to see any of you again.”

With that, she turned and fled, calling desperately for Emmaline to no reply. Hannibal stood with the knife in his limp hand, stunned and blinking owlishly until he began to shudder. Will was at his side in a second, but Hannibal only snarled at him, fingers flexed at his sides like claws.

“You tried to kill my sister.”

“Only to protect you,” Will pleaded. “I only meant to discourage her, Hannibal. I would never do that to you.”

Hannibal let it go shockingly quickly, choosing to believe Will and collapsing against him hard enough that Will swayed on his feet.

“She said she loved me, but she’ll never accept all of me.”

Will sighed and let him weep, holding him close. There was really nothing he could say.

In all his lifelong desperation, Hannibal had ultimately cost himself what he tried so hard to keep.

. . .

Abigail watched the scene play out before her, unmoving nor breathing, but hot tears streamed down her face when Emmaline’s terrified eyes flashed to hers. The other girl gulped down air, pressed on the razor’s edge of Hannibal’s capricious emotions, Abigail caught her own reflection in a butter knife.

“I’m sorry,” she croaked, so quiet that no one could hear. “I’m so sorry.”

It would always end like this…

But then, once again, it didn’t.

The dining room finally lay quiet, their elaborate meal nothing more than the detritus of a storm, and Hannibal pulled away from Will to survey the space with forced decorum.

“I asked them not to waste,” he murmured, a distant lament.

His eyes settled on Abigail, and she shrank even further into her seat.

“I asked *you* to be careful about venturing into the snow, Abigail.”

She swallowed and croaked, “I’m sorry. I… I shouldn’t have followed her. I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry.”

Hannibal slid his eyes away and said nothing more, and she didn’t know whether to be relieved or frightened. Granted, she was one of those things already.

Will didn’t let Hannibal go, crooning into his ear with one stabilizing hand on his cheek and the other on his hip. He just kept murmuring, “It’ll be okay.”

All Hannibal said in response was, “We must go pack our bags.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry again about such an ambiguous ending! I can't envision adding anything else to this plotline because I mainly wanted to explore the relationship between Hannibal and Mischa in an AU where she lived, and unfortunately I can never see her being happy around him when he's... well, Hannibal.

I imagine our murder trio is now on the run, Mischa returns to Paris, and Emmaline moves away to go to college and become a teacher. Mischa and Emmaline's relationship may never recover, but they both eventually learn to live outside of Hannibal's shadow.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!